

Quick-Reference Legal Summary

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Federal Wildlife and Related Laws Handbook; Chapter 4. Statute Summaries

MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT

16 U.S.C. §§ 703-712, July 3, 1918, as amended 1936, 1960, 1968, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1986 and 1989.

Overview. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act implements various treaties and conventions between the U.S. and Canada, Japan, Mexico and the former Soviet Union for the protection of migratory birds. Under the Act, taking, killing or possessing migratory birds is unlawful.

Prohibited Acts. Unless permitted by regulations, the Act provides that it is unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture or kill; attempt to take, capture or kill; possess, offer to or sell, barter, purchase, deliver or cause to be shipped, exported, imported, transported, carried or received any migratory bird, part, nest, egg or product, manufactured or not. Subject to limitations in the Act, the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) may adopt regulations determining the extent to which, if at all, hunting, taking, capturing, killing, possessing, selling, purchasing, shipping, transporting or exporting of any migratory bird, part, nest or egg will be allowed, having regard for temperature zones, distribution, abundance, economic value, breeding habits and migratory flight patterns. Regulations are effective upon Presidential approval. §§ 703 and 704.

The Act makes it unlawful to: ship, transport or carry from one state, territory or district to another, or through a foreign country, any bird, part, nest or egg that was captured, killed, taken, shipped, transported or carried contrary to the laws from where it was obtained; import from Canada any bird, part, nest or egg obtained contrary to the laws of the province from which it was obtained. § 705.

Arrests/Search Warrants. To enforce the Act, authorized Department of Interior employees may: without a warrant, arrest a person violating the Act in the employee's presence or view; execute a warrant or other process issued by an officer or court to enforce the Act; search any place with a warrant. All birds, parts, nests or eggs that are captured, killed, taken, offered or sold, bartered, purchased, shipped, transported, carried, imported, exported or possessed contrary to the Act will be seized and, upon conviction of the offender or upon court judgment, be forfeited to the U.S. and disposed of by the Secretary. § 706.

Violations/Penalties. According to the Act, a person, association, partnership or corporation which violates the Act or its regulations is guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine of up to \$500, jail up to six months, or both. Anyone who knowingly takes a migratory bird and intends to, offers to, or actually sells or barter the bird is guilty of a felony, with fines up to \$2,000, jail up to two years, or both. (Permissible fines are increased significantly by the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, as amended in 1987, which is summarized separately in this Handbook.) All guns, traps, nets, vessels, vehicles and other equipment used in pursuing, hunting, taking, trapping, ensnaring, capturing, killing, or any attempt on a migratory bird in violation of the Act with the intent to sell or barter, must be forfeited to the U.S. and may be seized and held pending prosecution of the violator. The property is to be disposed of and accounted for by the Secretary. § 707.

Miscellaneous. The Act should not be construed to prevent states and territories from making or enforcing laws or regulations not inconsistent with the Act or which give further protection to migratory birds, nests and eggs, if such laws and regulations do not extend open seasons. § 708.

The Act cannot be construed to prevent the breeding of migratory game birds on farms and preserves, and the sale of birds lawfully bred to increase the food supply. § 711.

In accordance with the various migratory bird treaties and conventions, the Secretary is authorized to issue regulations to assure that the taking of migratory birds and their eggs by the indigenous inhabitants of Alaska is permitted for their nutritional and other essential needs during established seasons. § 712.

Suggested in-text citation and full reference:

(16 U.S.C. 703 et seq.)

16 U.S.C. §§703-712. Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA). July 3, 1918; As Amended 1936, 1960, 1968, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1986, and 1989.

