



Condor Rising

*Their Amazing
Reappearance*

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The naked head of North America's largest soaring bird, the California condor, takes some getting used to. With its pink and orange caruncular texture and the five o'clock shadow of feathers in front of its eyes, it resembles a tequila sunrise in need of a shave. Capable of delivering a wicked bite with its flesh-enrobed, hooked bill, and its curious habit of cooling its hot feet by defecating on them (called urohydrosis), this bird looks like a creature only its mother could love—but don't be fooled.

The Ventana Wilderness Society, a privately funded non-profit, is one of three organizations in the West re-establishing wild populations of the endangered California condor. Deep in the remote back country of the 202,000 acre Ventana Wilderness, protected land in the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains north and east of the Big Sur coastline, a team of Ventana Wilderness Society wildlife biologists and interns works to save the high profile species.

It's difficult to grasp the scale of a bird

with a wing span of almost 10 feet until you actually see one flying. Condors weigh around 20 pounds, double the weight and build of a bald eagle. The VWS website lists locations for the best chances of spotting this enormous creature. In the fall months scan the beaches and ridgelines of the coastal topography along Highway 1 from Big Sur to Lucia. Condors, carrion specialists, do not kill to eat. Instead, they soar for miles, searching for large dead mammals like deer, cattle, and sea lions. They will flock to where turkey vultures, their more petite cousins, ride the warm air currents rising from the deep canyons. Buoyed by the upward moving currents of warm air, the soaring birds float effortlessly along the edges of chaparral and redwood-covered ridges. On winter mornings and afternoons the condors roost in a dense grove of redwood trees located at Pfeiffer Park, near the Big Sur Station, 25 miles south of the Carmel Crossroads. For the more motivated wildlife watcher, several moderate and strenuous hikes

from trailheads along Highway 1, offer spectacular views of the Big Sur Valley, the coastline, and increase the chances of seeing a condor. Don't forget your binoculars or spotting scope and bring lots of patience—you're working on condor time. For those who want instant results, the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History in Pacific Grove has a full size life-like fiberglass replica of a soaring California condor on permanent display in the building's atrium.

Gymnocops californius is the scientific name for the California condor. This wind master belongs to the "New World" vulture family which includes the slightly larger Andean condor, the much smaller turkey vulture and several other lesser known vultures. The condor's riveting brownish-red eyes, enormous glossy black wings sporting white triangular feather patches underneath, clawed feet adapted for walking rather than grasping prey, handsome downy black neck ruff, and utilitarian featherless head which cleans up nicely after



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poking inside rotting carcasses, give it a downright prehistoric appearance. Fossils excavated from Rancho La Brea in Los Angeles date *Gymnocops californius's* presence in California to the late Pleistocene Age, 40,000 to 8,000 years ago, the period when humans were spreading through most of the world.

Scientists attribute the condor's drop in numbers over the last century to loss of habitat, egg collecting, hunting, predator poisoning programs, and more recently, lead poisoning and collisions with power lines. The condor population steadily declined from 150 birds in the early 1950's to only twenty-two in the early 1980's. By 1987, the Condor Recovery Team, a consortium of public and private agencies, trapped all remaining wild individuals and brought them into captivity for preservation and restoration through a breeding program with planned future releases to the wild.

"Spend a day with these birds, watching them in the wild, and you want to fight for their survival," says Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the Ventana Wilderness Society. Prior to the condor release project, he worked to bring back the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon, both now removed from the endangered species list. "People refuse to let the condor disappear, and they are willing to do whatever it takes to save them," he adds.

Condor chicks are incubated and



Socializing after a good meal ©2003 DaveMonley

hatched at the Los Angeles Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park where they are raised by captive condor parents and humans using condor puppets. Six month old fledglings transfer to the Ventana Wilderness Society's "Condor Boot Camp" which serves as a school, evaluation site, and proving ground for the jocular juveniles. While the highly intelligent and gregarious birds acclimate in outdoor pens located on a private in-holding of land in the Ventana Wilderness, Joe Burnett, VWS wildlife biologist and Condor Field Coordinator, evaluates their behavior for evidence of survival skills necessary to live in the wild. Burnett judges the condor's confidence while interacting with its peers and whether it has a fear

of humans, both, which in his opinion, are the most critical skills for the bird's success on the outside. The juveniles learn condor culture through socialization with older wild "mentor" birds who teach their progeny the ways of the world.

Once released, the fantastic fliers are given physical exams once every six months which include testing for lead in their blood. Condors often feed on shot-ridden remnants from hunters' and poachers' kills of deer and other game. They are very sensitive to lead which enters their bloodstream when they ingest gut piles. Presently the free flying birds are fed lead-free carcasses in the hopes of preventing deaths from lead poisoning. The Recovery Team is working with the ammunition industry to promote the use of lead-free ammunition in the condor's range. Another mortality risk, collisions with power lines, have caused the deaths of several individuals. In the steep-walled Anderson Canyon near the release point, Pacific Gas and Electric has retrofitted wires with bird diverters, which make the lines easier for the birds to see.

Some biologists who worked with the dwindling wild population in the late 1970's and early 1980's express concern about the behavior of today's human-raised birds. Seeing their lack of fear of humans, these scientists don't view these newly released birds as truly wild. But Sorenson and Burnett think the released juveniles will mature to evidence wild condor

behavior. Sorenson comments: "I respect the opinions of my peers in the field of wildlife biology but I feel we will be successful at restoring the population." Sorenson is counting on the charisma of these birds to be key in their comeback.

In December of 2002 the Ventana Wilderness Society released 7 birds in the Ventana Wilderness. The 2003 releases are planned for late November/early December in the 24,000 acre Pinnacles National Monument, east of Central California's Salinas Valley in the Gabilan Mountains. Field pens are currently being constructed, with juveniles scheduled for transfer in mid-September for a four month adjustment period prior to release. Over one hundred years ago California condors nested in caves along the rocky crags of the Gabilans. VWS and the National Park Service hope the birds released this fall will feed and breed in this protected acreage, and acquaint other individuals of their flock with the ancestral habitat. Check the VWS and the Pinnacles websites for

the specific release date.

Evening approaches Big Sur and the Santa Lucia Mountains. To the west, the sun hangs low in the sky illuminating the wild landscape, turning it a burnished gold, while a blanket of fog drapes the Pacific Ocean, curling, rising, and wafting up the spring-fed vegetation- choked canyons, towards the condors' ancient home in the Ventana Wilderness. By restoring this primordial species to its ancient range throughout California we honor all of the species that are no longer here on earth. Recovering the condor points us into the future, towards a better world.



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Resources

www.ventanaws.org
www.nps.gov/pinn/
www.pgmuseum.org/
www.peregrinefund.org/condor_factsheet

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California Condor Fact Sheet
(from The Peregrine Fund's website):
Scientific Name:
Gymnogyps californianus
Population Low:
22 individuals in 1982
Current Population:
223 individuals
Life span: Unknown,
possibly up to 60 years
Wingspan: Up to 9.5 feet (3 meters)
Weight: Averages 16-23 pounds
Body Length: 46 to 55 inches