

Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Hopper Mountain NWR Blue Ridge NWR Bitter Creek NWR Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes NWR

BIOLOGY OF THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR

Gymnogyps californianus

Classification

The California condor, *Gymnogyps californianus*, is a member of the family Ciconiidae, or "New World vultures." The closest living relative is the Andean condor, *Vultur gryphus*, found in South America. Other members of the family include the turkey and black vultures. Originally classified in the order *Falconiformes* with eagles, hawks, falcons and Old World vultures, the New World vultures have recently been shown to be more closely related to storks and belong in the order *Ciconiiformes*.

Range

During the Pleistocene Era, ending 10,000 years ago, the condor's range extended across much of North America. At the time of the arrival of pioneers, the condor ranged along the Pacific coast from British Columbia south through Baja California, Mexico. By 1940 the range had been reduced to the coastal mountains of southern California with nesting occurring primarily in the rugged, chaparral-covered mountains, and foraging in the foothills and grasslands of the San Joaquin Valley. Today condors are being reintroduced into the mountains of southern California north of the Los Angeles basin, in the Big Sur vicinity of the central California coast, and near the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Habitat

California condors require large areas of remote country for foraging, roosting, and nesting. Condors roost on large trees or snags, or on isolated rocky outcrops and cliffs. Nests are placed in shallow caves and rock crevices on cliffs where there is minimal disturbance. Foraging habitat includes open grasslands and oak savanna foothills that support populations of large mammals such as deer and cattle. Condors may fly 150 miles a day in search of food.

Description

Color - Males and females are similar in appearance. Adult condors have a mostly bald head and neck. The skin of the head and neck is colored in shades of pink, red, orange, yellow, and light blue; becoming more intensely pink/orange during times of excitement and in the breeding season. Feathers are mostly black except for white underwing linings. Juvenile birds have dusky black heads and bodies with limited white underwing linings. At hatch, chicks have light pink and orange skin and are covered in off-white down which is quickly replaced by gray down.

Size - California condors have a wing span of about 9.5 feet. Adult condors stand at a height of 45-55 inches and weigh 17 to 25 pounds. Males are generally slightly larger than females.

Talons - Unlike birds of prey, condors do not have sharp talons capable of killing or grasping objects.

Beak - The condor's beak is long, sharp, and powerful. It can pierce the hide of a horse. Condors use their beaks to tear the flesh from carcasses, and to touch, feel, and explore their surroundings. Condors have been observed using their beak to remove foliage from trees to create better roosting sites, and manipulating rocks and other objects in caves to improve the nesting area.

Voice - The condor has no syrinx (voice box), but communicates with a combination of hisses, growls, and grunts. There is also a well-developed system of communication through body language.

Crop - The crop is a pouch like enlargement below the throat where food is stored and partially digested before it enters the stomach. In one feeding an adult California condor can take in as much as 3 to 4 pounds in its crop. A crop can be seen as a bulge in the upper chest area of a condor.

Senses - Condors have keen eyesight to help them spot food from great heights. The color of their iris changes from tan to red as the bird matures. Condors do not have a good sense of smell and do not use it to locate food as do turkey vultures. California condors have good hearing.

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CALIFORNIA CONDOR POPULATION HISTORY

| <u>DATE</u> | <u>WILD</u> | <u>CAPTIVE</u> | <u>TOTAL</u> |
|-------------|--|----------------|--------------|
| | thousands | | thousands |
| Pleistocene | | 0 | |
| 1890 | 600 | 0 | 600 |
| 1939 | 60-200 | 0 | 60-200 |
| 1965 | 60 | 0 | 60 |
| 1967 | 60 | 1 | 60 |
| | Topa Topa, brought into captivity from the wild | | |
| 1982 | One chick brought into captivity to begin captive breeding program; One immature bird brought in for health reasons | | |
| | 24 | 3 | 27 |
| 1983 | Population reaches its lowest level total of 22 before breeding season Three wild birds were lost during the year Two chicks and four eggs brought into captivity for breeding program | | |
| | 16 | 9 | 25 |
| 1984 | One chick and eight eggs removed from the wild; all 8 hatch with 6 surviving; One immature bird in the wild died from lead poisoning (IC1); During the winter of 1984-85, 4 of 5 known pairs lost one member | | |
| | 11 | 16 | 27 |
| 1985 | Three eggs taken from the wild; two of them hatch successfully in captivity Two birds died in the wild and three were captured | | |
| | 6 | 21 | 27 |
| 1986 | Two eggs taken from the wild - one egg hatched successfully; Four adult condors were taken from the wild; One condor (AC3) died after being captured; cause of death was lead poisoning | | |
| | 2 | 24 | 26 |
| 1987 | Last wild condor (AC9) trapped and brought into captivity on 19 April 1987 | | |
| | 0 | 27 | 27 |
| 1988 | First egg produced in captivity hatched on 29 April | | |
| | 0 | 28 | 28 |
| 1989 | Four chicks produced in captivity | | |
| | 0 | 32 | 32 |
| 1990 | Eight chicks produced in captivity | | |
| | 0 | 40 | 40 |

| | 49 | 113 | 162 |
|-------------|--|------------|------------|
| 2001 | Twenty-one birds released in total this year: - 5 birds in the Ventana Wilderness Sanctuary near Big Sur (April 2001); - 10 birds in Arizona, near the Grand Canyon (December 2001) - 6 birds, in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary, Ventura County (May 2001). One young bird died of starvation in Arizona; Ventana lost their first bird ever, to a power line collision; southern California, one dead from lead poisoning, one dead from power line collision and one missing presumed dead. | | |
| | 63 | 119 | 182 |
| 2002 | Twenty-one birds released so far: - 6 birds in Arizona, near the Grand Canyon (February 2002) - 8 birds, including <u>AC9</u> in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary, Ventura County (May-July 2002) - 7 birds released in the Ventana Wilderness Sanctuary near Big Sur. (December 2002) - 3 birds released in the San Pedro Martir National Park in Baja, Mexico (October 2002) Three chicks hatched in southern California, hatch dates were May 11, April 11 and April 28. Two eggs were laid in Arizona, one was broken and the other infertile. All died just short of fledging and one of the breeding males disappeared. A newly released condor was returned to captivity for behavior/immaturity reasons. In central California a juvenile disappeared. In Arizona, one was found scavenged by a coyote, one was returned to captivity for behavior/immaturity reasons, one was shot, and another bird died from lead poisoning. | | |
| | 80 | 118 | 198 |
| 2003 | Fifteen birds released - 7 birds released in Arizona, near the Grand Canyon (3-March/2-October/2-November) - 2 birds released in Baja, Mexico (May) - 4 birds released in So California (June/July) - 2 birds released in Central California (December) One bird shot (AC-8), four month old wild chick died, one just released juvenile killed by a coyote, and three birds presumed dead from fires in southern California and one bird electrocuted from a power line collision; one juvenile found dead (possibly malnutrition); and one dead from lead poisoning in central California. One found dead of unknown causes in Arizona and another dead in Baja due to predation. | | |
| | 89 | 126 | 215 |
| 2004 | Four birds released - 4 birds released in Central California (January) Four more birds released at the Pinnacles National Monument site. | | |

KEY:

Totals listed represent end of calendar year counts and projected numbers in January 2004

In the Wild as of 12 January 2004

- Arizona = 40
- Central California = 24
- Southern California = 20
- Baja, Mexico = 5
- Total = 89

In Captivity as of 12 January 2004

- World Center Birds of Prey = 41
- Los Angeles Zoo = 26
- San Diego Wild Animal Park = 22
- Portland Zoo = 12
- Field pens/awaiting release = 25
- Total = 126

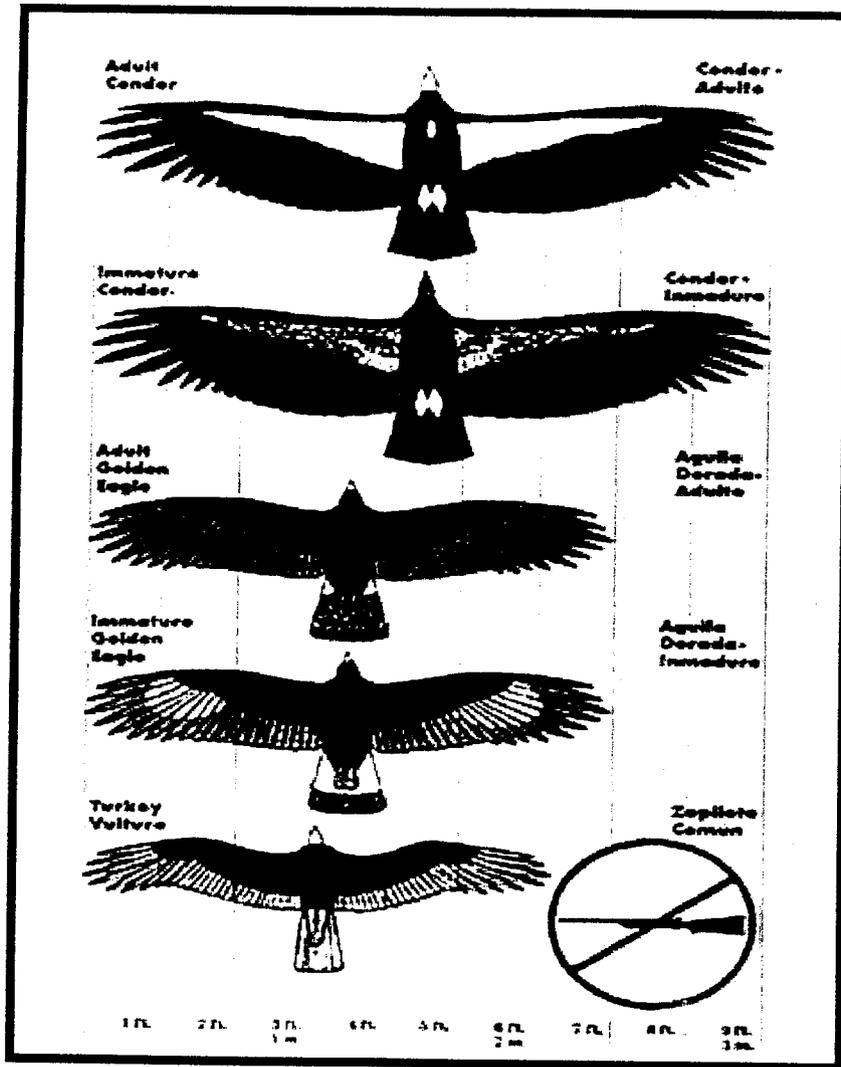
Deaths since 1998

- 1998 = 5
- 1999 = 7
- 2000 = 16
- 2001 = 5
- 2002 = 7
- 2003 = 11

Total Population as of 12 January 2004 = 215

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California Condor Recovery Program



In-flight species comparison
 (Print a copy to take with you when looking for condors)

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