

California Condors Return to Pinnacles National Monument



Photography by Ralph W. Schardt

Soaring on wings spanning 9.5 feet, the California condor conjures up a vision of a creature that survives from days gone by. These winged giants historically nested and foraged within Pinnacles National Monument, but during the 20th century nearly went extinct, with only 22 birds remaining in the world in 1987. Pinnacles became a release site in 2003 and today is an integral part of the ongoing recovery program to return the California condor to its place in the natural world. A series of lofty spires named Condor Crags located inside the Monument once again allows visitors to experience seeing these huge birds soaring overhead against the namesake rocks.

The Brink of Extinction

For thousands of years, California condors thrived in western North America. These scavenging birds foraged on a wide range of mammal carcasses, such as the remains of wolf and grizzly kills or marine mammals washed up on shore. Lewis and Clark saw condors eating from a dead whale on the Columbia River in 1805. Over the last two hundred years, the range of the California condor has contracted – so much that by the late 20th century, only a handful remained in the coastal mountains of south- central California. Why did this happen?

This relatively recent and rapid decline in condor range and population came about from large scale changes in the North American landscape. New technologies and rising human populations in the 19th century led to reduced elk and marine mammal populations as well as toxins in the environment that condors had never encountered before. Condors and other large birds were also killed for museum

collections, intentionally out of fear, and for the souvenir and utilitarian values of their feathers and eggs.

Today, habitat degradation due to development continues to reduce suitable foraging and nesting habitat. However, the greatest threat facing condors is lead poisoning caused by ingesting spent bullet fragments imbedded in the remains of animals shot with lead ammunition. The ingested lead destroys the condor's nervous system causing paralysis of the digestive system and loss of coordination, eventually leading to death by starvation or capture by predators. Condors reach sexual maturity at 6 years and typically produce only one chick every 2 years, so the condor population is particularly vulnerable to these threats as mortality exceeds the capacity to produce new chicks. Current efforts to encourage the use of less toxic nonlead ammunition offer hope that lead poisoning will be reduced sufficiently to allow these magnificent birds a chance to continue their struggle to bounce back from near extinction.

Pinnacles and the Road to Recovery

Trouble for condor populations was noted by the mid-20th century, and by 1967 the California condor was listed as "endangered" by the federal government. Twenty years later, the last wild condor was captured and placed into a successful captive- breeding program. Thus began an intense recovery program to save this largest of all North American land birds from extinction. This program continues to return condors to the skies in California, Arizona and Baja, Mexico.

The Pinnacles condor release program is a cooperative effort of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Ventana Wildlife Society,

and the Peregrine Fund (both non- profit conservation organizations). The first release of six juvenile condors at Pinnacles was December 2003, with additional releases of six more in October 2004, seven in September 2005, five in 2007, and seven in 2008. 2009 saw the first nest by a Pinnacles condor.

The ultimate goal is to foster a self- sustaining population of 20 – 30 condors, something that has not occurred at Pinnacles for over 100 years. Success depends on the cooperation and goodwill of local property owners, hunters, government agencies, private organizations and citizens like you.

What You Can Do to Help

Five years of scientific studies have demonstrated that spent lead ammunition is the major source of lead exposure in condors. You can do your part by switching to non-lead ammunition such as copper bullets, which are much less toxic and do not fragment like lead. Hunters surveyed in Arizona during 2005- 2006 after using these copper bullets

to hunt mule deer, overwhelmingly (93%) said that non-lead bullets performed as well or better than lead bullets

Also, please remember that condors are wild animals, should never be offered food and should not be approached closer than 100 feet.

California Condor Facts

Scientific Name: Gymnogyps californianus

Family: Cathartidae (New World Vultures, related to storks)

Size

California condors have a wingspan of up to 9.5 feet. Adults can weigh anywhere between 15 and 25 pounds (averaging 20), and stand from 45 to 55 inches tall.

Visual Characteristics

Condors reach sexual maturity and attain adult plumage and coloration by 5 – 6 years of age. Adults have pink/orange featherless heads, a black ruff around the neck, black plumage and large, solid white triangles on the underside of their wings. There are no visible differences between males and females. Nestlings fledge (leave the nest) full- grown at 6-8 months of age, but remain dependent on their parents for a year or longer. They are black in color, including their featherless heads. Juvenile condors have mottled white patches on the underside of their wings.

Life Span

Unknown, but thought to live up to 50 years in captivity and 40 years in the wild.

Feeding

Condors are scavengers that feed on carcasses, primarily those of large mammals like deer, wild pigs and cattle. Condors sometimes find food by investigating the activities of turkey vultures and ravens and using their much larger size to displace the smaller birds. They normally feed in a group, with the dominant birds eating first. The typical foraging grounds of condors are grasslands and oak savanna foothills that support populations of large mammals. Recently, marine mammals washed up on beaches along central California coastlines are increasingly being fed upon by condors.

Roosting

Condors spend most of their time perched, sunning or preening. They roost on trees, snags, cliffs and rocky outcrops where launching for flight is easy. These roosts are important because they are isolated and protect condors from predators. Since condors are very social birds they often roost in a group where dominant condors take the best positions.

Flight

Condors do not flap their wings much to fly; instead, they soar on warm thermal updrafts. They hold their wings very straight and flat, unlike the unsteady, wobbly flight of turkey vultures. Condor flights of up to 150 miles in a single day and speeds of more than 55 miles per hour have been recorded.



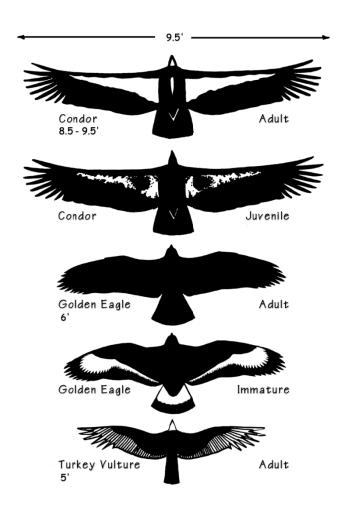
Playing

Condors are inquisitive, social birds. They enjoy playing with almost anything they can tug, toss, chase or retrieve. This behavior is especially pronounced around "watering holes."

Nesting

Condors do not build stick nests. They primarily nest on bare ground in cavities in rocky outcrops or cliffs, but nesting in large holes in redwood or giant sequoia trees has also been documented.

Keep your eyes to the sky and note the following characteristics



- (i) Overall size: Condors are the largest North American bird. They are much larger than their turkey vulture relatives.
- (2) Wings: Condors have long, flat wings and are very stable in flight. Adults have large triangular-shaped patches on the undersides of the wings, while juveniles have mottled patches. Look for finger-like primary feathers extending from each wing while the bird is in flight.
- (3) Head: In adults the bare head and neck are pinkish- orange, the eyes are a brilliant red and the beak whitish. Juveniles have black heads and dark eyes. A ruff of black feathers encircles the base of the neck.
- (4) Look for the identification tag attached to the wing. If possible, note its number color, and whether the tag has dots or a line below the number.

