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A vulture with a future

Biologists reintroduce the condor to Baja California

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November 20, 2002

SIERRA SAN PEDRO MARTIR, Mexico – On Oct. 28, 1805, William Clark and Meriwether Lewis were camped at the mouth of the Columbia River when Lewis recorded seeing a huge black vulture, the underside of its wings emblazoned white.

"The buzzard is, we believe, the largest bird in North America," Lewis wrote in his journal.

Lewis and Clark were not the first explorers to see the California condor, or *Gymnogyps californicus* – a member of the "New World Vultures." Father Antonio de la Ascención, the friar on Sebastian Viscaino's expedition to the California coast in 1603, wrote of several condors and a grizzly bear feasting on a beached whale at Monterey Bay.

American Indians had deified the condor long before Western Europeans first saw them. The bird's cousin, the Andean condor, was central to Inca theology.

For more than 25,000 years, the California condor soared above the North American continent, from British Columbia to Baja California, and as far east as New York and Florida. But by the late



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

A small team of wildlife biologists is preparing five young condors for eventual release in Baja California. Above, two condors sun themselves in their outdoor aviary.

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- [Why condor observers do what they do](#)

1800s, as Americans rapidly settled the West, the condor was on a rapid trajectory toward extinction. Only 22 condors remained in the wild, and one in captivity, by 1982.

Today, thanks to captive breeding programs, they are on the rebound, and this fall they returned to Baja California – the southernmost point of the California condor's historic range. Here, a small team of wildlife biologists is preparing five young condors for eventual freedom in this forested mountain range 140 miles southeast of Ensenada.

The condors' temporary home is a cluster of pine trees, draped in nylon netting and surrounded by a chain link fence with a view of a canyon that drops toward the Pacific Ocean. They spend their days feeding on the carcasses of cattle and other animals their caretakers provide them, and orienting themselves to their new home. Once the condors are set free, perhaps by Thanksgiving, biologists will track them by homing onto radio transmitters attached to each bird until they feel confident that the animals can survive in the wild unaided. The hope is to release 20 condors here over the next 10 years.

The rugged and unpopulated mountains are protected in a vast Mexican national park, and the largely pristine environment is free of most signs of civilization.

The reintroduction of condors to Baja California is designed in part to evaluate the latest captive rearing techniques. These five birds, like groups of other young condors released in the United States, were raised at the Los Angeles Zoo by keepers using puppets that look like adult condors.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Xewe, an 11-year-old condor, was brought down to Baja California with the other five to act as a mentor to the younger birds.

But these birds were also mixed early on with adult condors, who often act as mentors to younger birds. Biologists will be watching closely to see how they adjust to the wild.

After years of negotiation with the Mexican government, the birds were brought to Baja California from Los Angeles in August and set for release Oct. 9. With American biologists leading the program, the Mexican government has committed the land and funded one quarter of the \$175,000 project. The Zoological Society of San Diego, with \$20,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other donations from the Santa Barbara and Los Angeles zoos, is paying for the rest.

Oct. 9 began with great fanfare, but within days it became clear that the condors' return to Mexico was going to take some time, and some patience.

With Mexican and American government officials, television crews and others crowding a nearby lookout, biologists opened the aviary door to release three of the birds. Unsure what to make of their newfound freedom, the young condors stayed put.

A day later, they ventured into the wild and almost immediately ran into trouble. Two of them strayed farther than biologists wanted, and couldn't find their way back to where food awaited them. An eagle, apparently offended by the intrusion into its territory, nearly knocked one condor out of the sky.

Within a few days, the biologists decided to recapture the birds, better prepare their own base camp for the coming winter and give the condors more time to orient themselves to their new home.

Mike Wallace, a San Diego Zoo biologist who is leading the recovery effort in Baja California, said he plans to rerelease at least two of the birds soon.

"I'm determined to get them out again in the next few weeks, (but) if we have to chase them all over in deteriorating conditions, I'd rather keep them in here until the weather is better," he said.

"That may be through the winter, and that's fine, too. We don't lose anything in the long run. This is a long-run program."

Past travails

After 20 years of captive breeding and closely managed releases into the wild, 70 condors now live in Los Padres National Forest in Ventura County and north of the Grand Canyon. An additional 130 remain in captivity. But October was a tough month for them.

In Ventura County, where 21 condors fly free, three chicks hatched in the wild last spring died within just a few weeks. At least two had ingested bottle caps and shards of glass. Biologists later found such debris littering their nest, and they speculated that their parents had roosted in a cave formerly used by ravens who cached the items.

There have been other hazards.

Because condors feed on carrion, they are vulnerable to lead poisoning by ingesting bullets and buckshot after hunters leave their game in the wild.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, several condors died after flying into power lines – a danger nearly eliminated after biologists trained young condors in captivity to avoid them.

Although protected by the federal Endangered Species Act, condors have been shot at by people. And in one publicized case in 1993 a dead condor was found to have ingested ethylene glycol – a component of anti-freeze.

Biologists say they are learning from such mishaps, and that the recovery effort, while slow and unsteady, should take 10 to 20 more years. They hope to build three populations of condors, 150 in Arizona, 150 that span the West Coast from Oregon to Baja California, and 150 in captivity.

Still, some critics say the condor may be more trouble than it's worth. The bird – a hulking, ancient-looking beast that looks like a character Steven Spielberg might have used for Jurassic Park – is an anachronistic species whose day has come and gone, they say. Maybe it's time to just let it go.

Wallace doesn't buy it.

"We placed them in this situation where they're nearly extinct," he said. "It's our responsibility, at least to those of us who care about such things, to try to fix it.

"It's not their fault they're being lead poisoned. It's not their fault they're being shot. It's not their fault they're eating anti-freeze or colliding with power lines.

"It's our fault."

For Wallace and others committed to saving the condor, the bird is a masterpiece of evolution, one that was once astutely adapted to its environment.

"When it's gone, it's gone forever," Wallace said. "There's never going to be another."

Flying home

The Sierra San Pedro Martir is an unexpected site for those who associate Baja California with parched desert and empty beaches. Jeffrey pine trees, thick manzanita and huge granite boulders color this extreme southern end of North America's Sierra range. White tailed deer, mountain lions, coyotes and golden eagles populate the wilderness.

The Sierra's western edge falls steeply toward the Pacific Ocean. Strong winds race up the foothills and into alpine canyons. It's perfect flying weather for the California condor.

Catalina Porrás Peña and Juan Vargas, two Mexican biologists working closely with Wallace, will share this terrain with the condors for the next two years, while the animals become established in the wild. A half-mile from the birds' outdoor pen, Peña and Vargas have established a base camp stocked with provisions for a harsh winter.

At dawn every morning, Peña hikes to the condors. By late October, the morning air is frigid. Bundled in a camouflage jumpsuit, Peña becomes silent as she draws closer to the birds. She expects them to be wide awake, and they are – tearing at the carcass of a road-kill dog she and

Vargas dragged in the night before.

The condors, standing more than 3 feet high, steady themselves over the mound of flesh and fur. Their wings snap in the air with an audible flutter, like a sail in a shifting breeze.

For more than an hour, Peña kneels in a tiny, darkened hut, peering through one-way glass to observe the condors' movements. She takes notes on the birds' behavior and social interactions.

As they feed, the condors bore into the dog's flesh with their sharp beaks, wrapping their tongues around the food and pulling it in with a furious rhythm of pecking motions. In the wild, there is no time to dawdle.

The condors' social hierarchy is determined by a combination of age, size and even personality. Xewe, an 11-year-old condor that has flown in the wild, was borrowed from the San Diego Wild Animal Park to act as a mentor to the five other condors. The birds learn how to survive in the wild by observing their elders, so biologists expect the younger birds, which range from 1-1/2 and 2-1/2 years old, to learn from Xewe.

As the oldest, Xewe also commands the most respect. She feeds first, and afterward spends most of her time alone, perched on a branch or granite boulder, preening and facing the morning sun. Condors develop a pink and salmon-colored neck and face as they grow older, and Xewe is clearly distinguished from the others, whose heads still have a dark gray, almost ashen complexion.

Peña, Vargas and Wallace have documented a strict feeding order. As she takes notes, Peña explains that biologists will need to know who's who in the pecking order before they release them into the wild.

Condors spend most of their time looking for food, and when they find it they gorge themselves until their chests protrude. At one point, Xewe, her pink chest bursting forth from a tuft of black feathers, returned to the carcass.

"She's not hungry," Peña said, searching for an adjective to describe the condor's insatiable appetite.

"She's a glotóna," – a glutton, she said laughing.

Condors, nevertheless, are fastidious creatures, and after eating they spend several minutes at water, bathing and then rubbing their necks on rocks.

They eventually retreat to the pine trees, sitting still together in twos and threes.

Less than a mile away and within view of their perches, Corona Ridge reaches 8,400 feet above the sea. Gigantic granite boulders rising from the ridgeline make fine launching points to catch the wind.

The ridge falls precipitously toward the setting sun, to a hazy outline of rolling foothills and a blanket of coastal fog beyond.

The sunset bathes the pines in a golden light, and it is easy to imagine that the condor is returning to a place unchanged for thousands of years.

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