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Why condor observers do what they do

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SIERRA SAN PEDRO MARTIR – The people who work with condors have gone to extraordinary lengths to better understand the creatures they are trying to save. Mike Wallace took up hang gliding. Juan Vargas and Catalina Porras Peña traded a warm bed for winter camping in the mountains of Baja.

Wallace, a San Diego-based biologist who is leading the recovery effort in Baja California, began hang gliding a decade ago to get closer to the condor's natural habitat – the sky.

He wanted to know how the condor ascended on powerful columns of rising warm air, called thermals, to gain altitude. By flying in the same air, he sought to experience how condors ride the wind and survey the landscape far below.

The condor seeks altitude, sometimes up to 15,000 feet, to get a broad view of its environment, and can fly 150 miles in a day in search of food. It looks for wolves and coyotes hunting prey and feasting on their catch. It looks for eagles, turkey vultures and other condors that may have already keyed into a dead, or dying, animal.

Spiraling upward, Wallace has shared thermals with condors and eagles in a mutual search for lift. "They do fly with hang gliders, until they get bored and then say, 'OK, I know what you are,' and they take off."

Wallace, 51, now understands how strong Santa Ana winds can blow a young, inexperienced condor off course – and frustrate wildlife biologists on the ground trying to track it.

"My eyes are open to all of this stuff now," he said.

Vargas and Peña have signed up to spend the next two years camping in the Sierra San Pedro Martir, observing, feeding and caring for the condors now housed in an aviary. Once the birds are free, they will track the animals using radio telemetry, hiking across the rugged

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mountains to keep track of them.

Vargas, 44, has traveled throughout Latin America to study pumas, jaguars, ocelots, reptiles and birds. He has camped for months on remote islands in the Sea of Cortez to study sea lions, and rappelled deep into caves in search of rare parrots.

Peña came to the condor after changing careers. She studied biochemistry in college, and worked for years in Mexico's food industry. But a childhood love of the mountains led her to volunteer in seasonal bird counts for a local bird-watching club. She was later recruited by an endangered species breeding center in Monterrey, Mexico, where she worked for five years breeding endangered parrots and falcons.

When Wallace began seeking Mexican expertise for his condor project in Baja, Peña and Vargas were eager recruits.

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