



Ventana Wildlife Society CONDOR REINTRODUCTION NOTES FROM THE FIELD, 2001



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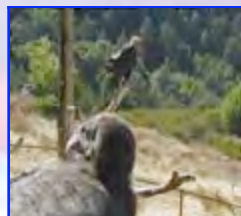
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All California condors released by VWS are given identification tags placed on their wings so that field biologists can monitor their individual progress. The wing tags, also known as patagial tags, have different colors based on the date of their release: Blue - December 12, 1997; Yellow - January 30, 1999; Orange - March 4, 2000; and White - April 5, 2001.

Notes from the Field, December 2001:

Numerous storms made landfall on the Big Sur coast range this month bringing high winds, heavy rains and even hail at times. The high ridges above the condor release site were blanketed with light snow after one storm, leaving the condors in a deep chill for a few days. The condors fare well during the cold weather; an inner layer of dry down feathers insulates their bodies for warmth while an outer layer of feathers shields off wind and rain. Large trees, such as Redwood and Ponderosa Pine, provide an excellent roost for condors in seek of protection from heavy storm conditions. We refer to one large roost tree as "high-rise" because it resembles a high-rise apartment complex when multiple condors roost there. Redwood trees, with their towering heights and long horizontal branches, are "houses in the sky" for condors. Protecting these roost trees is as necessary as protecting the condors. Condors need a place to seek refuge when the storms get heavy; it's a matter of survival in the winter.



Hoinewut, adult mentor, continues to teach "Condor 101" to chicks R42, R56, and R60. The young chicks continue to emulate his behavior and have increased their social confidence amongst the group. We have seen



an increase in physical strength and coordination amongst all the chicks as they move about the flight pen, most of which is initiated by Hoinewut. Condor R60, the youngest of the chicks, is currently at the bottom of the hierarchy and hasn't been as social as the other two chicks, R56 and R42. With the arrival of three additional condor chicks in mid January, we hope he will gain rank amongst the group and increase his level of social interaction.

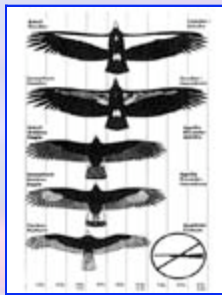
The wild flock endured the winter rains and even managed to pull off some big flights amidst the storms this month. Condors Y94 and Y90 flew approximately 200 miles to Big Sur from southern California to join the rest of the group. Y92 and B61 are the only two Big Sur condors that still remain in southern California with the southern flock. These two female condors have predominantly remained down south for the past seven months, with only one brief visit to Big Sur in September of this year.

We successfully captured seven of the wild condors in mid-December for blood-lead testing and radio transmitter replacement. Much to our relief, all seven (B64, B67, Or99, Or4, Or8, Or12, W33) tested low for blood-lead and were re-released into the wild.



The year 2001 had its share of high and low points. Fortunately, the condors in Big Sur had mostly high points. Here's a review of the significant events that occurred this past year at Ventana Wildlife Society's Condor Reintroduction Program. Year 2001 was off and running in January when all five white-tagged condors and adult mentor, Hoinewut, were transferred to Ventana Wildlife Society's Big Sur release site. Mother Nature gave us a reminder in February when heavy snow temporarily marooned the condors and field staff at release site. In March, two wild condors, B71 and Y92, were brought in temporarily to provide invaluable mentoring to the five white-tag chicks in the release pen. Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, joined the Ventana Wildlife Society to commemorate the release of the five white-tag chicks into the wild in April, bringing the total Big Sur condor population to 19. In early May Condor W30 was found dead of electrocution after colliding with a power line. Total Big Sur condor population is now 18. Condor W30 was the first reintroduced condor to die in Big Sur since the project's inception in 1997.

In June and July we captured wild condors for blood/lead testing and we found no lethal levels. During these same months the blue and yellow tags made multiple long distance flights to southern California's Sespe Condor Sanctuary. In August, an aerial tracking flight located condor Y68 on Fort Hunter Liggett Military Reserve. In September, Y90 made his first trip to southern California, the last of the yellow tags to make this 200-mile journey. All nine Blue and Yellow-tagged condors spent the entire month of October in southern California's Sespe Condor Sanctuary, 200 miles south of Big Sur. In November, the first three of this year's six red-tagged condor chicks were transferred to Ventana Wildlife Society's Big Sur release site with mentor condor, Hoinewut. In the final month of 2001, condors Y90 and Y94 returned to Big Sur while Y92 and B61 remained in southern California for all of December. The year-end Big Sur condor population stands at 18. The total condor population for California is 32 (Big Sur=18, southern California= 14).



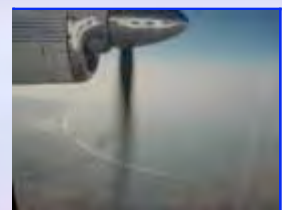
The best condor viewing opportunities can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Try hiking the Valley View Trail or just watch from the park entrance. Scan the redwood treetops for large, dark birds. Condors are commonly mistaken for turkey vultures, so be sure to look for white under-wing patches or numbered-color tags on the side of each wing to confirm your sighting. (Click on image at left and print out in-flight profiles.) Good luck, until next month ...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, November 2001:



Winter-like conditions fell upon Big Sur this month, bringing multiple storms with high winds, cold temperatures, and



heavy precipitation. The youngest half of the Big Sur condor flock rode out the storms, staying close to home and keeping the new condors company at the flight pen of the release facility. The new group of chicks, which include condors R42, R56, and R60, arrived safely to Ventana Wildlife Society's Big

Sur Release site on November 7. All three chicks are roughly six months old and were raised by their condor parents at San Diego Wild Animal Park's Condor Breeding Facility.



On November 6, the day before the chicks arrived, condor 63 was transported to Big Sur from LA Zoo. Condor 63, or "Hoinewut", will serve as an adult mentor to this year's chicks until their release this spring. This is Hoinewut's third time serving as mentor to young chicks in Big Sur. His first mentor group was the yellow tags, and then two years later he mentored the white tags. Hoinewut is now ten years old and has already started teaching his lessons to the new youngsters.



The new chicks watch his every move, as did the yellow and white tags in previous years, mimicking everything he does. If Hoinewut



bathes in the pool and drinks, the chicks bathe and drink. If Hoinewut begins to feed, the chicks follow his lead and feed. If Hoinewut spreads his wings open, the chicks one-by-one spread their wings open. Throughout all of this, Hoinewut keeps a watchful eye over the chicks, like a parent over a child.

The wild condors have shown a keen interest in the new chicks and mentor. Although wild with a competitive hierarchy, the Big Sur condors are still sub-adults and the presence of an adult mentor still captivates them. We plan to periodically integrate the wild population into the release pen with the chicks and Hoinewut to increase socialization prior to release. Basically, we want the young chicks to form friendly social bonds with some of wild condors before they go out on their own. This strategy worked very well for the orange and white tags the last two years and we hope for the same results with this year's red tags. We are still awaiting the transfer of two more chicks, R51 and R54, from LA Zoo in late December/ early January.



In other field news, condors B67, B71, B70, Y68 all returned to Big Sur from southern California in the midst of the storms. The storms didn't seem to delay their flight time too much; they all made the trip in under 2 days. Condors B61, Y90,

Y92, and Y94 still remain in southern California near the Sespe Condor Sanctuary. We are anticipating the return of these four condors to Big Sur in the next month or so as winter really sets in.

The best condor viewing opportunities for the month of December can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. The condors are again frequenting their favorite winter roost in the Pfeiffer redwood treetops. Good luck...don't forget to bring a pair of binoculars or a spotting scope. Until next month ...

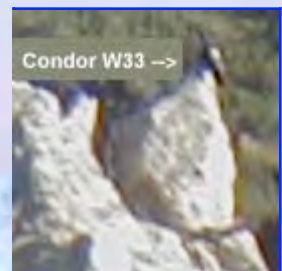
--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, October 2001:

As we move deeper into Fall and the days get shorter, condor flight time decreases and smaller scale movements become more the norm. This has been the case for the orange and white tagged condors this month, but not for the blue and yellow tags. The blue and yellow tagged condors spent the entire month 200 miles south of Big Sur in and around southern California's Sespe Condor Sanctuary. USFWS biologists observed the blue and yellow tags foraging with condors from the southern flock in the Sespe throughout October.

In Big Sur the orange and white tags have been relishing the absence of the older, more dominant blue and yellow tags. Feeding has been a bit easier, but not without a little danger and excitement. The young condors have been successfully fending off a pair of Golden Eagles that have taken a keen interest in the supplemental carcasses. Ventana Wildlife Society field observers, Jessica Steffen and Bridget Cummings, observed condor Or99 shake off the high-speed pursuit of both Golden Eagles with some fancy flight work. Valuable flight lessons that will inevitably make Or99 and the rest of the flock stronger and wiser with age.

Condor W33 made an unprecedented journey this month flying 40 miles south into the foothills east of Cayucos, CA. W33 was first observed in the Cayucos area approximately three weeks ago by Ventana Wildlife Society field observer Alison King. Alison followed W33's signal for



two days before finally spotting her perched atop a rock formation in a small foothill canyon. W33 returned late October to Big Sur and is currently back with the rest of the white and orange tags.



We recently completed the construction of a portable condor treatment facility. Different condor injuries/illnesses require different treatments and the portable treatment facility will accommodate whatever is needed. The facility consists of one large holding pen, one small holding pen and one examination room. The large holding pen can accommodate up to four condors that require general care, while the small holding pen will house only one condor that requires intensive care. The examination room, situated between the two holding pens, is where each condor will be held to receive medical treatment. The facility has been placed at a strategic, protected location that will allow for faster, more effective condor treatments by local volunteer veterinarian staff.

We don't anticipate utilizing this facility on a regular basis, but if the need arises, it will be there for the condors. As we prepare to capture and test all 18 Big Sur condors for blood/lead levels this Fall, we can only be relieved to know there is a specialized facility where veterinarian staff can treat a sick/injured condor.

The condors continue to move locally over the Big Sur area. For the best condor viewing opportunities visit Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park or Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Carefully scan the coastal ridges and redwood tree tops with your binoculars -- even condors can appear small from a mile or two away. Good luck!! Until next month ...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, September 2001:

On behalf of the Ventana Wildlife Society, I would like to express our deepest condolences to the victims and the victims' families of the September 11, 2001 bombing tragedy. The

condors continue to fly free, as do the Bald Eagles, our national symbol for freedom, reminding us to keep our heads up high and to continue living the American dream.

Condors B61 and Y92 finally returned to the release area in Big Sur after a three and a half month stay in southern California. Their return was brief though, roughly a week; both females headed back to southern California's Sespe Condor Sanctuary at the end of September. Aware of the strong social nature of condors, we suspect that B61 and Y92 have made a few new friends in their new surroundings down south. Despite the consistent flights of Big Sur condors southward, it has been over a year since condors from the southern flock have flown northward to Big Sur. We speculate the younger Big Sur condors may be more drawn to this area due to the presence of adult, breeding-age condors in the southern flock as well as the recent nesting attempts by adult condors in southern California's Sespe Condor Sanctuary.

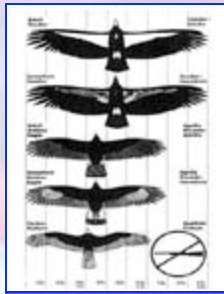
In other condor news, Y90 made his first flight to southern California. He was the last of the yellow tags to make this 340-mile round-trip journey. None of the orange tags (a year younger than the yellows) have yet to make it down, but we know that day isn't too far off.

The weekly aerial flight surveys (via airplane) continue to bolster the ongoing condor tracking efforts. The flights have not only confirmed locations we were already aware of, but have also brought to our attention previously unknown condor localities. In particular, locations in and around Ft.



Hunter Liggett and Hearst Ranch/San Simeon. Access to these areas is somewhat restricted and the flights have helped confirm the presence of condors in these regions. In particular, the flights placed condor W33, a one and a half year old female, on the east side of Ft. Hunter Liggett near Lake San Antonio. Field observer Phil McKenna found W33 in this area immediately after receiving the flight information and was able to get a visual of her soaring with 15 turkey vultures. Phil suspects she may have fed on a dead cow in that immediate area and that she may have followed turkey vultures to that carcass. This is a milestone for such a young condor and invaluable information for the field crew that records and documents the movements and behavior of each wild condor

every day.



The orange and white tags (the younger half of the Big Sur flock) continue to stay closer to home in Big Sur. Based on their latest movements, I would suggest hiking the Ewoldsen Trail or the Waterfall Trail at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park to spot one of them on the wing or in a redwood tree perch.

Good luck and until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, August 2001:

Condor W33, a 1.5 year old female, made a fast recovery from her bout with an infection last month and is doing very well. We noticed the first signs of recovery at the beginning of August. Field Observer, Alison King, observed her aggressively feeding with the other condors and noted an overall increase in flight activity in and around the release site. In fact, W33 was observed in late August flying over a dead cow on a local ranch near Pt. Sur with a dozen turkey vultures. The presence of grazing cattle near the dead cow may have kept W33 from landing and feeding. None-the-less, W33 could return in the near future to attempt feeding when things appear a little safer on the ground.



Condor Y68, a 4.5 year old male, was located on recent flight survey on the west side of Fort Hunter Liggett. Located 20 miles southeast of the release site, Fort Hunter Liggett is a sizable chunk of land at approximately 164,760 acres. Hunter Liggett has potential foraging opportunities for the Big Sur flock with approximately 250 elk and an abundance of black-tailed deer. Many spectacular rock formations, such as the Palisades, are scattered across the Hunter Liggett property and may one day be used by the condors as a nest site. We have long anticipated that the Big Sur flock would visit this area.

Condors B61 and Y92 still remain in southern California and have now been in that area for over three months. They continue to do very well, feeding and roosting regularly with condors from the southern flock. Y68, B64, B70, B71, and Y94 made flights down to B61, Y92, and the southern flock, but always returned to Big Sur shortly after each visit.

The remainder of the flock (which includes all the white tags, orange tags, Y90, and B67) moved within the coast range for the month of August with small forays as far south as Rocky Butte/ San Simeon and as far north as Pt.Sur.



Deer hunting season is in full swing in Monterey County and we ask that all hunters please bury the gut piles or any part of the deer that may contain lead bullet fragments. Condors can ingest these lead fragments and become poisoned, sometimes fatally.

The best bet for condor watching would be on the east side of Andrew Molera State Park on the "East Molera Trail". Another good spot would be on top of Cone Peak near Nacimiento-Fergusson road. Good luck and until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, July 2001:



A typical day this month could be best described as long, hot and sunny. To a condor this means great flying conditions and easy flying. Two condors, B61 and Y92, remained in southern California the entire month. These two condors have now been there since the end of May 2001 (over 2 months!). We also observed B64, Y68, B71, Y94 make brief, weeklong visits to the southern flock near the Sespe/Hopper Mountain area. The others have stayed somewhat close to the release site, with medium range flights down to Rocky Butte near Cambria, CA. A resident that lives near Rocky Butte informed us that he observed condors W19, Or99, Or9, Or12, B71, Y68, and Y94 soaring over the top of Rocky Butte with a dozen turkey vultures. This is an exciting observation because Rocky Butte is a historical nesting area for condors. Although the oldest Big

Sur condors are still a couple years shy of breeding age, we are intrigued to observe them in potential nesting areas.

The blood/lead testing for the Big Sur flock continued this month and we temporarily captured B67, Or4, Or99, Y94, and Or12. To our relief, all five condors analyzed had very low blood/lead levels and were cleared to return to the wild.

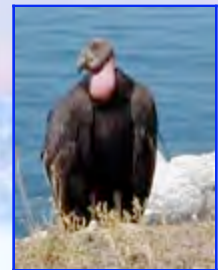
Condor W33 was temporarily captured for health concerns at the end of July and is currently being evaluated. She will most likely be returned to the wild early August.

The best condor viewing opportunities can be found at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park on the Ewoldsen trail. Until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, June 2001:

The older condors continue the large-scale movements typical of summer. These long journeys take them as far as Lake Piru in southern California, a 200-mile trip. This month we documented B61, B64, B70, Y68, Y92, and Y94 making big flights south. B61 and Y92 left at the end of May 2001 for the Lake Piru area and still remain there. These two condors, both females, have banded up temporarily with the southern flock. The others didn't journey as far as B61 and Y92 and returned to Big Sur three to four days after they initially left the area.



Traveling long distances over multiple ridgelines increases the likelihood that a condor will find his/her own wild food/animal carcass. If the condor decides to feed on this carcass, he/she risks the chance of ingesting a lead fragment. If the animal was shot with lead ammunition and left for dead, the condor could potentially be fatally poisoned by ingesting a small piece of lead bullet fragment. In an effort to combat this threat, we capture the condors periodically to check blood lead levels. Condors face the biggest lead poisoning risk in summer

and early fall, which coincides with the deer hunting seasons in central and southern California.

This month we successfully captured and blood tested five condors from the Big Sur flock -- B64, B70, B71, Y90, and Or9. Using a portable lead-blood testing kit, the blood-lead level can be measured within three minutes for each condor. This alleviates the field crew from waiting 4-5 days for blood-lead results to return from the laboratory. The three-minute wait is short, but can seem excruciatingly long when waiting for a result to appear on the blood analyzer. If the condor scores high, that bird will be rushed to a clinic and undergo immediate treatment that will hopefully save its life. If a condor scores low, we simply let them go back into wild.



We start the testing with Or9, a two-year old male. We place a droplet of his blood on the analyzer and wait...three minutes later his lead level pops onto the screen, 4.8 micrograms per deciliter(mg/dl), a burst of relief by the whole crew. One condor cleared, four to go. We suspected Or9 would have a low score considering his movement range is about a third of what we see with the yellow and blue tags. The next condor up for testing is Y90, a three-year old male. A droplet is placed in the analyzer and three minutes later his score pops up, 12.1 mg/dl, another sigh of relief from the crew. We followed the same procedure with B64, B70, and B71. The blue tags have the largest range and move within that area at the highest frequency, placing them in the highest risk category for lead poisoning. The crew is especially nervous as we prepare to test the next three condors. B64 and B70, both four-year old males, test very low -- 7.5 mg/dl and 3.8 mg/dl, respectively. One more condor left, four-year old female B71. We apply a droplet of her blood to the analyzer and wait...her score pops onto the screen, 30.7 mg/dl. The highest we've seen amongst the five, but still relatively low and she is cleared with the others.

This was the first round of testing so far this summer; we will be trapping other condors in the coming months. We hope they too will test low and avoid tainted carcasses within their range. Condors are known to hide physical weakness right up to their last breath, making it difficult to save them before it's too late. If they do get lead poisoning, we can only hope these periodic

trap-ups will detect a rising blood-lead level and potentially save their life.

The best condor viewing opportunities can be found at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park on the Ewoldsen Trail and the Highway One Vista Point pullout one mile north of JP Burns. Until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, May 2001:

This update is dedicated to condor W30, who perished on May 9, 2001. Jessica Steffen and I discovered W30's dead body on May 9 in the late afternoon. We spent a better part of the afternoon tearing through the thick poison oak before finding W30

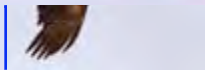


lying on his chest with wings half open at the bottom of a steep, narrow canyon. Directly above W30's body were power lines and we believe he may have collided or grazed the wires in flight and been electrocuted, causing him to crash into the canyon. His body was promptly transferred to San Diego Zoo's Pathology Department where a cause of death will hopefully be determined by next month's update.

W30 was a young bird, only a year old and was in the wild for a little over a month. His was the first fatality we have experienced in our five years of reintroduction in Big Sur. I guess we can consider ourselves fortunate to have lost only one condor out of twenty-six released, although it's very hard to accept the death of any condor in this challenging reintroduction process. The immense pressure placed on these young condors to survive and do well after release is only compounded by the fact that there are so few of them in existence. Once released these large birds are on their own to learn about the world and sometimes, like with other animals, nature will claim those that become a little careless.



On a brighter note, the remaining eighteen Big Sur condors continue to flourish and travel to distant places. We documented condors B61 and Y92 flying 175 miles to the southern California release site operated by the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) in late May. B61 & Y92



were observed by USFWS biologists in the vicinity of a new nest site occupied by 3 adult condors. One adult male is courting two adult females that are using the same nest cave. The nesting three-some has been incubating the two eggs since early May. The unusual courtship set-up of one male and two females is not normal and USFWS biologists suspect that the eggs will not be incubated sufficiently enough for a successful hatching to occur, but we're still hoping for a miracle.

VWS biologist Phil Mckenna observed an interesting behavior by Y90 this month. Phil watched Y90, a 3-year old male, perform a courtship display to B61, a 4-year old female, at a roosting tree in the release canyon. Y90 stood on the same branch with B61, facing her with his wings half extended and head drooping down on his chest for nearly twenty minutes. This is a bit early for a 3-year old male, but condors have been known to start courtship displaying at this age. In the coming years the frequency of these courtship-type observations will rise and soon after we hope to find the first nest sites of the Big Sur flock. These condors still have a few challenging years to go before reaching that goal. We can feel confident that they will continue to learn and hone those necessary survival skills that will one day be passed down to their very own offspring.

The best condor viewing opportunities can be found along the Ewoldsen Trail in Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park or Valley View Trail in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Good luck, until next month.

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, April 2001:



The spring wild flowers were in full bloom as the newly released white-tagged condors tested their wings along the Big Sur coast range for the first time in their lives. (See the [2001 condor release update](#).) Within a few hours of their release the white tags were showing great poise in the sky. This may have been a result of releasing these condors at a slightly older age (almost a year old) than previous releases and providing them with more wild mentors than we ever had before. The most notable and longest flight this month was by

Condor W22, a female. She flew approximately 20 miles north of the release site, stopping to rest in redwoods along the way. The entire journey took her approximately six days.

Two of the white tags, W30 (male) and W33 (female), became of concern to us a couple weeks after release when they had not successfully returned to the site to feed. Feeding with the entire wild group is a very challenging task for the new birds. Older condors dominate the carcass through brute force and intimidation. The white tags are now at the bottom of the condor social hierarchy so they need to be very strong, or very creative, to find an opportunity to feed. W19, a male, took the straight-ahead approach and confronted the most dominant, intimidating wild condors. His strategy paid off and he successfully fed with the group (although he did take his share of thrashings from B70 and B64, both 4-year-old males).



W31, a female, used a less confrontational strategy and chose to attempt feeding when the most dominant condors were not present at the carcass. Despite her efforts to avoid the top ranking condors, she still received a fair amount of thrashings from less dominant condors like Y92 and Y94, both 3-year-old females. This is one of the most important and challenging tasks these new birds currently face and will continue to confront in the coming months. Learning to fly was just the tip of the iceberg. We are happy to report that all the white tags have successfully fed, one way or another, with the wild flock since their release on April 5, 2001.

The wild flock of blue, yellow, and orange tags seemed a bit overwhelmed by the 5 newcomers this month. The blue tags, the eldest birds at 4 years old, were more like big brothers and sisters baby-sitting the kids. They were partially tolerant of the new birds but not exactly buddies with them either, enforcing their social status when necessary. The yellow tags reacted much in the same way. The orange tags, on the other hand, welcomed the new birds with much to gain socially; now the white tags will occupy the bottom social slot where the orange tags had reluctantly resided the past year. A big jump up the social



ladder for the orange tags, but still many lessons to be learned and a long year ahead for the white tags.



On a field-crew note, Marylise Lefevre, the condor chick-rearing specialist, is on her way to the Republic of Congo in Africa to volunteer for a chimpanzee reintroduction project. The project "H.E.L.P-primates" was started in 1989 and is the first project to successfully reintroduce chimpanzees to the wild. The

chimpanzees, mostly orphaned, are raised on an isolated island away from wild chimps where they learn to socialize and forage. They prepare and release the chimpanzees into the wild in a similar way we prepare and release condors. As with condors, socialization and foraging are the most important behaviors that these young chimps need to develop. When the chimpanzees have developed sufficiently, they are taken to a temporary holding pen and then released into the wild. Marylise's experience with preparing and releasing young condors into the wild will no doubt have a big impact on this project and we wish her the best of luck. Please visit the H.E.L.P.-primates web site, www.help-primates.org.

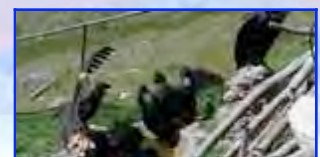
The best condor viewing can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Try the Buzzard's Roost or Valley View Trails. Good luck and until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, March 2001:

February's heavy rains tapered off and March began with much less moisture. Under sunny, clear skies the wild flock spent a good portion of each day on the wing in their home range of Big Sur. We observed a large amount of movement activity within a small area of approximately 15 miles along the coast range. We anticipate flights of 25-175 miles in the coming months as the days grow longer, temperatures get a bit warmer, and flying conditions improve.

Two of the wild condors, B71 and Y92, were temporarily captured into the flight pen using the double-door trap, to serve as sub-adult mentors for the young,



inexperienced white tags. This technique of using wild condors as mentors was first implemented by the Ventana



Wildlife Society last year with the orange tags. The benefits of this technique were immediately noticeable after the release of the young condors, as they integrated into the wild group with much more ease than we had observed in the two previous releases. The white tags are the second batch of condors to benefit from the wild mentoring technique, but they still have many more lessons to learn from the older and more experienced wild condors. The white tags were released on April 5, 2001. Details appear in the special report on the [2001 Ventana Wildlife Society condor release](#).



Jessica Steffen, Field Assistant for the condor crew, observed the first signs of pair bonding by the Big Sur flock. She watched B64 (4-year old male) pursue B71 (4-year old female), who was temporarily being held in the flight pen with Y92, the five white tags, and 10-year-old adult R63. B64 seemed very agitated as Jessica observed him pace

around the perimeter outside the flight pen. B64's agitation grew as he attempted to open the door of the pen with his feet and then flew head first into the side wall of the flight pen, trying to break through. The presence of an adult breeding male, R63, in the flight pen didn't ease B64's situation and may have been the catalyst for his persistence. We did have the ability to allow B64 to enter the flight pen through the double-door trap, but chose not to for fear of a dangerous interaction between R63 and B64. B71 was released a few days later and reunited with her prospective future mate, B64. This could be the start of a lifelong pair bond between these two condors and hopefully we will observe them lay their first wild egg in a couple years when they reach breeding age.

Italian Biologist, Stefano Allavena, visited our release site for a couple of days this month to exchange ideas on avian reintroduction. Stefano headed up a project that successfully reintroduced Griffon Vultures in Italy. The Griffon Vulture Project is located in the "Monte Velino State Natural Reserve", located 100 kilometers east of Rome. Between 1994 and 1997 they released a total of 59



birds; almost all were born in the wild in Spain and were 5-6 months old when they arrived. The birds were kept in captivity for 20-22 months and then released. The Griffon Vulture Project reported that 14 Griffons died after release (2 shot, 1 for unknown reasons, 10 poisoned with strychnine on a dead horse in April 1998, and another bird collided with power lines in May 2000). Another Griffon was severely injured because of a collision with power lines a few months ago and will be released very soon. The first reproduction in the wild was in 1997 (two young) and then one young in 1998, 4 in 1999 and 7 in 2000. A second release site is being established 50 kilometers north of the first site, with plans to release 17 birds in summer 2001 and 20 in summer 2002.



The wild flock of 14 California condors continues to visit the Big Sur Valley and its surrounding ridges on a daily basis. On April 5, 2001 we will add 5 condors to the existing Big Sur flock for a total of nineteen birds!!! The best condor viewing opportunities can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park on the Buzzard's Roost and Valley View Trails. Good Luck, until next time....

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, February 2001:

On February 10 a large winter storm blanketed Big Sur with heavy snowfall making mountain roads impassable above elevations of 2,500 feet. Ventana Wildlife Society biologists, Marylise Lefevre and Ross Conover, attempted to drive to the release site and made it only halfway before the truck got buried in snow up to its axles. For the next five hours they hiked eight miles through 2 feet of snow with heavy packs before finally reaching the release site. Upon closer observation of the release pen they found the five young condors and their mentor, Hoinewut, had weathered the storm



Condor W19 in release pen

quite well and were in great shape. A few of the young condors had collected as much as an inch of snow on their backs by the end of the storm. This was the first time any of these young condors had ever experienced snow.



Jessica Steffen and Marylise Lefevre take a break from the hike in the snow-covered backcountry

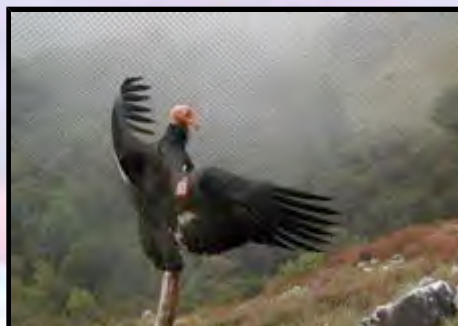
On February 13 biologist Jessica Steffen, accompanied by volunteers Jason Scott and Lionel Leston, hiked in eight miles to the release site to assist Marylise and Ross with clearing the road of treefall. Although they successfully removed all the fallen debris from the road, deep snow still prevented vehicle access, and food supplies for the condors and biologists

were starting to run very low.

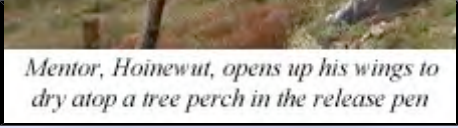
On February 16 biologist Katie Hughes and I began to scramble together the needed supplies for the marooned condors and field staff. We received a \$100.00 emergency food donation from a local grocery store for the field crew and pulled condor food (still-born calf carcasses) from our storage freezers. That afternoon, with supplies loaded, we successfully four-wheeled our way through deep snow to the release site. We arrived at the release site just after nightfall and placed out a carcass for the young condors in the release pen and another carcass for those out in the wild. Later that evening, exhausted, we finally arrived at basecamp and celebrated the occasion with a cheap bottle of wine.



Katie Hughes and Joe Burnett on their way to basecamp with emergency supplies



A few days later the snow began to melt and vehicle access was again possible. The road was clear for now but new challenges were arising for the condors and field crew. From February 17-25 warm, heavy rainfall drenched the



Mentor, Hoinewut, opens up his wings to dry atop a tree perch in the release pen

Big Sur coast range. A condor's ability to search and find food is greatly reduced during heavy rain. The condor's large wings and feathers are basically nonfunctional when wet, making flight nearly impossible. Condors have adapted, over thousands of years of evolution, to survive these long spells without food by storing meat in their crops and slowing down their metabolism. We have documented many of the wild condors going over ten days without food during rainy weather. Despite the incessant rainfall at the end of February, the wild condors successfully found supplemental carcasses, capitalizing on breaks in the storm to fly to these feeding areas. We are proud to report that all the condors and field crew made it through February unscathed and a little wiser. Februarys of past have been as challenging as this one and we're always glad when we make it through these unplanned adventures safely.

Great viewing opportunities of the condors can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. The condors tend to perch in the top of redwood trees in the early morning and late afternoon. Keep your eyes to the sky, until next time....

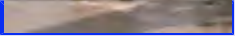
--Joe Burnett, Field Supervisor

Notes from the Field, January 2001:

The installation of a solar-powered camera monitoring system was completed at the start of the month. The entire system was a contribution by the TerraFocus Project. Please visit www.solarexpert.com for complete details of installation and contributors. The camera will transmit live video via radio signal a half mile across a steep canyon to our basecamp. In basecamp we can view this live video, allowing us to monitor condor activity in the flight pen. The video monitoring system increases the safety of the condors in the flight pen by reducing the response time to an emergency. The safety of condors in the flight pen is our highest priority.



On January 26 the Ventana Wildlife Society transferred 3 additional condors from the Los Angeles Zoo to the release facility in Big Sur. These condors were placed in the flight pen



with W19, W22, and W33. The new group consists of two 9-month old chicks, W30 (male) and W31 (female), and one 10-year old adult male, Hoinewut (pronounced "Ho-ee-nee-whut", named by the Chumash Native American tribe of southern California). Hoinewut's adult presence will have a great influence on the young white tags as they prepare for release over the next couple of months.

The three newcomers were released into the flight pen the morning of January 27 and Hoinewut wasted no time attaining the top position. This is the first of many important lessons Hoinewut will teach the young white tags. Marylise Lefevre, who watches over the young condors prior to their release, observed Hoinewut perform a courtship display to female condor W33. A courtship display is when the male partially opens his wings, droops his head down, and walks away from the female (hoping she will follow him!). W33 did not respond to his display; she's still a bit too young (less than a year old) to understand his adult behavior.



The entire wild population of Big Sur condors, currently at fourteen, visited the flight pen enclosure this month. The presence of new condors is always a big attraction for the wild birds. Hoinewut is no stranger to the wild flock. He mentored the yellow tags and interacted with the blue tags visually from inside the flight pen two years ago. Y68 was very close to Hoinewut before his release back in 1999 and they were recently observed nibbling beaks through the flight pen fence on one of Y68's visits to the pen. Social bonds appear to be long lasting for condors as does their memory of past associations with individual condors. New bonds continue to be established between the orange tags and the new group of white tags. Hoinewut's mentoring will be felt beyond the confines of the flight pen. His visual influence and nonverbal communication are being absorbed by the wild flock every time they visit.

Flights for the wild flock this month were limited to the Big Sur region. The presence of new birds at the release site and unfavorable flying conditions typical at this time of year contributed to their lack of movement. The weekly aerial tracking effort continues to provide valuable roosting and movement data on the wild flock. This data has allowed the

field crew to further intensify our tracking effort on the Big Sur flock, which can be very challenging at times.



If you're looking for an opportunity to view the condors, I would recommend visiting Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. The Buzzard's Roost trail and Valley View trail have been the most rewarding for condor watchers. Keep an eye on the surrounding ridge lines and redwood treetops for a possible sighting. Condors are easily confused with turkey vultures, so make sure you get a good look at the flight behavior. Turkey vultures (1) "teeter" when flying and (2) the wings form a V-shape in flight. Condors have (1) long flat wings that are very stable when soaring, (2) a white triangular patch on the underside of each wing, and (3) fingerlike primary feathers that extend from each wing in flight. (See [photo of condor Or99](#).)

Good luck, until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Supervisor

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