



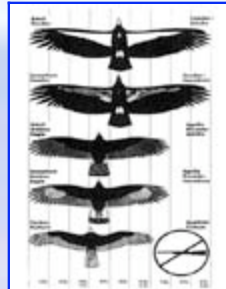
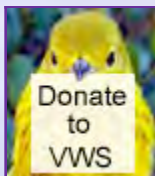
Ventana Wildlife Society CONDOR REINTRODUCTION NOTES FROM THE FIELD, 2003



[Click for full photo](#)

Click on small images to see full-size photos.

- [Home Page](#)
- [About VWS](#)
- [Condors](#)
 - [Field Notes](#)
 - [2006 Notes](#)
 - [2005 Notes](#)
 - [2004 Notes](#)
 - ➔ **2003 Notes**
 - [2002 Notes](#)
 - [2001 Notes](#)
 - [2000 Notes](#)
 - [1999 Notes](#)
 - [Video](#)
 - [Release](#)
 - [Life History](#)
 - [Cool Facts](#)
 - [Lead Exposure](#)
- [Eagles](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Habitat](#)
- [Ornithology Lab](#)
- [Big Sur Center](#)
- [Join VWS](#)
- [Donate to VWS](#)



Comparison Chart

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; White - April 5, 2001, Red - December 12, 2002, Black - December 19, 2003. Individual condors are identified by the first letter of the color (or first two letters, in the case of Orange-tags), followed by a number. For example, Y92 is a yellow-tag and Or99 is an orange-tag. The last two digits of the condor identification number appear on the wing tags.

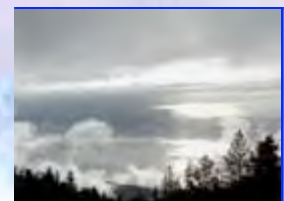


Notes from the Field, December 2003:

Frequent readers of the Field notes may notice that things are a little different this month. Joe Burnett, Condor Coordinator here at Ventana Wildlife Society has left for his new post as Assistant Condor Curator at the Oregon Zoo. I am Jessica Koning, the new Big Sur Condor Field Supervisor. I'll be doing my best to do as great a job keeping the Big Sur flock safe and free-flying as he did, and I will also be writing the Field notes from now on. Thanks for reading!

Big Sur Update

December was a cool and stormy month. One storm dropped 6.5 inches of rain on our release canyon, and the condors were gifted a white Christmas with big slow snowflakes falling the evening of the 25th. However, I'm not sure a white Christmas is as much fun when you have to sleep outside in the top of a



tree like a condor!

The weather has not dampened the condors' spirits. We have been noticing a lot of 'flirty flying', with condors playfully chasing each other and performing some crazy flying stunts. This is the time of year when condors begin pairing for the breeding season in late winter and early spring. Our first courtship display occurred on December 17, with female condor 194 displaying to male condor 164. 164 is still our dominant male, and it seems like the older females are competing for his attention.

Most of the condors released here in Big Sur are still here for the winter. The large redwood grove at the mouth of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park is still a favorite roost, especially when the weather gets nasty. Female condors B161 and Y192 are still in southern California. They spend so much time there that we consider them resident at that site.

We have some sad news to impart about Y179. He was originally released in 1999, but was recaptured for approaching people. In the intervening years, his behavior improved so remarkably we gave him another shot. This male was released in Big Sur spring 2003. Unfortunately, he appears to be a victim of the fires that swept through the Sespe Condor Sanctuary in late October. After not receiving any signals from him for such a long time, our hopes that he fled the fires into a remote area are gone. Y179 was doing a wonderful job adapting to the wild, and we add his loss to the other tales of destruction and grief.

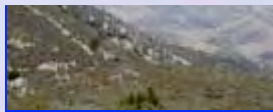
Pinnacles Update

The official condor release date at Pinnacles was December 19, 2003, but the condors flew outside the pen for the first time on December 20. It was so wonderful to see condors flying again in a lost part of their historical range. Two condors were released, 278 and 287. These two birds left their pen at almost the same second, did a couple of loops above their flight pen, and took off! Flying conditions were wonderful, and before we knew it, they were 500 feet above the ground. We were surprised to see that the two birds split up almost immediately, but we were excited to see them using their wings so well. I do have to admit that their landings often lacked finesse, but pilots will tell you that is the hardest part of flying a plane. Both condors found safe perches off the ground for their first night in the wild.

The second day in the wild was more difficult for everyone. The 6.5 earthquake rumbled through the Pinnacles area, causing no injury or damage, but certainly surprising condor 278 into the air. I guess if I could fly, I would leave the ground if it started rippling like that. Both condors did frequent, short flights throughout the day. 287 chose a stout grey pine to roost in for the night, but 278 decided to roost on the ground in an area with many coyotes. We were afraid he would be attacked at night while he slept, so we recaptured him. He is now back in the flight pen, and will be given another chance at the wild in a little while.



The next release at Pinnacles will be very soon. The inclement weather has made it difficult to release, but all the condors are ready to be free. My advice



for spotting these giant youngsters is to be atop a prominent peak within Pinnacles National Monument between 10 am and 2 pm, the best flying time of the day. Sunny breezy weather is the best.

Good luck with your condor viewing!

--Jessica Koning, Big Sur Field Supervisor

Notes from the Field, November 2003:

I would like to begin this update by thanking all of you who read the 'Notes From The Field' each month. The monthly updates, which I began writing five years ago (November '98), give the reader a firsthand report on the activities and accomplishments of the Big Sur condor flock from a field biologist's perspective. November 2003 will be my last update. I will be leaving my Condor Coordinator post at Ventana Wildlife Society and starting my new position as Assistant Curator for Oregon Zoo's Condor Captive Breeding Program this coming month. Jessica Koning, Field Supervisor for the Big Sur condor flock, has spent the last three years in the field working with condors and starting December 2003 she will begin writing the 'Notes From The Field' updates. Jessica's experience and dedication will provide an equally informative, but unique, perspective on the Big Sur condor flock. Please show Jessica the same great support you showed me the last five years, it was a great ride!



Big Sur Update

Sixteen condors made their way back to Big Sur by month's end. This appears to be a seasonal movement pattern, but then again these condors are also showing a trend to move any time of year, any distance. Condors B61, Y92, and Y79 are the only condors from the Big Sur flock that still remain in southern California, which has been the home for B61 and Y92 for the better part of the last two years. Pretty soon we'll have to include them in the southern flock.

Much to our excitement, in early November Ventana Wildlife Society biologists spotted condor Or99 feeding on a dead sea lion on the Big Sur coast. A group of eight Turkey Vultures was also seen feeding on the sea lion carcass, but Or99 was the only condor.

We were able to recapture Or99 this month to test for lead and replace a broken radio tag. Much to our relief, his blood-lead level was low. The last time we recaptured Or99 for lead testing his blood-lead level was very high and he was held captive for a five-day Chelation Treatment, not a fun experience for Or99 or the biologists involved.

Condor R56 was recovered from a very remote and rugged area in the Los Padres National Forest. The cause of death for R56 came back inconclusive due the condition of the body and high level of decay. The Pinnacles and

Big Sur field crews put in an incredible effort to locate the fallen condor. Condor R56's body was finally discovered on the fourth attempt by biologists Andy Abate and Nora Toth. I would also like to recognize the biologists who took part in the earlier attempts. They include Jessica Koning, Rebecca Leonard, and Greg Gryneiwicz. We were relieved to finally find R56, but also saddened to know that our suspicions about her death were correct.

The breeding season is just around the corner and we're already seeing some interesting behavior. It's still too early to tell what will unfold, but male condor B64 has been seen in the company of female Or8 more than his mate of last season, B71. This could change as we get closer to courtship time, but it is none-the-less very interesting to see the females vying for the top male's attention. No other breeding-related activity has been observed in the rest of the flock.

With the mass return of condors this month to Big Sur, there couldn't be a better chance to see them in the wild. Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park is the best bet. Scan the tops of the large redwoods in and around the park. They love to overnight there this time of year.

Pinnacles Update



The Pinnacles release has been rescheduled for December 19, 2003. The six condor release candidates are poised and ready to go. Be sure to return next month to hear about their first



days in the wild and the best places to safely view them. We attached radio transmitters and wing tags to all six condors, including a GPS satellite tag to condor 287. The tag color for this group is black with white numbers. The black tags will blend in nicely with their black feathers. Be sure to return next month to hear about their first days in the wild and the best places to view them safely at Pinnacles National Monument.

Come back next month for Jessica Koning's condor field.update ...

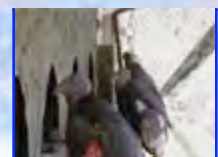
--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

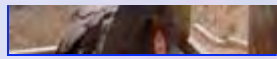
Notes from the Field, October 2003:

Pinnacles Update

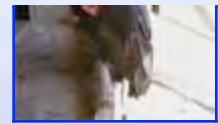


The rambunctious group of young males getting ready for release at Pinnacles on December 4, 2003, is giving the new release





facility a thorough work-over.



[Note: the release date has been changed to December 19.] They managed to break both perch scales inside the release pen with their moderate physical antics. An electric perch scale has managed to withstand their fury, but it's still too early to tell if it will outlast them. The adult mentor has a full plate trying to keep the upper hand on all the action, but he always has a way of bringing these boys back to reality.

We continue to see great social development and feeding among the group and are confident they will be primed and ready on release day.

Big Sur Update

Fires fueled by Santa Ana winds continue to wreak havoc in the southern half of the condor range. A fire came very close to burning condor facilities at Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge, but fire crews were able to save all structures (hats off to the fire crews, great job!) Most of the condors from the Big Sur and southern flocks managed to steer clear of the Hopper fire. US Fish & Wildlife biologists are still looking for five condors from the southern flock that have been missing since the fires began.

A small fire broke out in Big Sur on October 27, but was quickly extinguished by local fire crews. Luckily conditions were very calm when this fire started and crews were able to get on top of it quickly. Much to our relief Big Sur received its first rain of the season on October 31. Hopefully the rains will continue into November and put a big damper on the fire season until next summer.

Condor 204, treated for lead poisoning last month, is still foraging at the Big Sur release site and recovering well. He has remained close to Big Sur with the exception of a small foray down to Atascadero/San Luis Obispo. We believe he was accompanied by the youngest condor in the Big Sur flock, 256, for most of journey. A few days later condor 204 returned to the Big Sur release site, but no sign of 256. We immediately became concerned for 256 and began to search for her location. After seven days and no luck finding 256, we sent an airplane up to locate her signal. The good news was that her signals were found 25 miles south of the Big Sur release site on the east side of the coast range in a very remote, rugged canyon. The bad news was that both her signals were in 'mortality mode' meaning that 256 had perished. An attempt to locate 256's body failed due to dangerous terrain that was not safely navigable. Another attempt will be made in early November using a different route with hopes of recovering 256's body to determine why she died. Condor 256 was released into the wild on December 12, 2002, and will be remembered by all those she inspired.

The remainder of the flock, now at 19 condors, continues to do very well and can be seen in and around Big Sur. Try Cone Peak Trail for a great, but moderately strenuous, hike and good condor viewing opportunities. With winter fast approaching, check out the redwoods at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park for roosting condors and turkey



vultures. Good luck and until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, September 2003:



Pinnacles Update

On September 10, 2003 seven condors were successfully transferred to

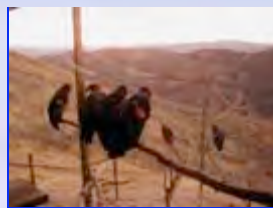


the new release facility at Pinnacles National Monument. The group of seven condors sent to Pinnacles includes six sub-adult males (265, 266, 270, 278, 286, 287) and one adult male (mentor R63). We placed Mentor R63 in the pen first and allowed him time to adjust to his new home. Adjusted and relaxed, R63 would help calm and alleviate stress in the younger condors as they are released into this very foreign and new surrounding.



In complete awe, biologists from both Pinnacles and Ventana Wildlife Society took turns releasing each of the six young condors into the flight pen. Each release of a condor into the flight pen signified the end to a successful transfer, but also marked a new beginning for each bird. When released in early December 2003, they will be the first condors to soar over the skies at Pinnacles in over a hundred years.

These seven condors, prior to arrival at Pinnacles, were residing in the Big Sur release pen the last nine months. During that nine-month period Ventana Wildlife Society biologists Nora Toth, Melanie Banville, Eric Stover, and Jessica Koning provided round-the clock care for these condors, as well monitoring Big Sur's wild condor flock. An incredible effort by an extremely dedicated crew.



The Pinnacle condors have adjusted incredibly well to their new home and have been very active. So active that they managed to break two perch scales located inside the flight pen. We



replaced the two scales with a single electronic weight scale and we hope it can withstand the heavy use and abuse by the young and active condors. The condors have acclimated to the change in weather, which is much drier and hotter than coastal Big Sur. The new release facility was designed to deal with the weather extremes at Pinnacles. We provided more shaded area in the flight pen and a naturalistic rock pool that can be cleaned remotely and

more effectively by field staff. We also increased the size of the one-way glass viewing ports used by field staff to monitor the birds. These are all part of improvements made upon the first prototype design used in Big Sur the last seven years.

Viewing the condors will not be possible until after release. At that point I will begin providing the best viewing opportunities at Pinnacles.

Big Sur Update

Just when we thought it couldn't get any quieter in Big Sur, a whole slew of Big Sur condors returned from southern California. Returnees included condors B64, B67, B71, Y79, Y90, Or99, Or4, Or8, Or9, W19, and W31. Big Sur condors B61, B68, Y92, Y94, and W22 remained in southern California near Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge. The youngest in the Big Sur flock (R36, R42, R51 and R56) have yet to venture outside the Big Sur home range, but are very active within this area.

As we have seen in the past with this established pair, adult female B71 shortly followed the arrival of male B64 this month. These two should slowly become more territorial over the next few months as we near breeding season. We are also seeing activity with some of the younger condors, but it still too hard to tell what will come of it until breeding season comes around this winter. Although we will be releasing condors at Pinnacles the next few years, Ventana Wildlife Society will continue to monitor the Big Sur flock and continue to evaluate the new GPS tracking technology being tested on two Big Sur condors.

The best condor viewing continues to be on the Ewoldsen Trail at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Good luck and until next month...

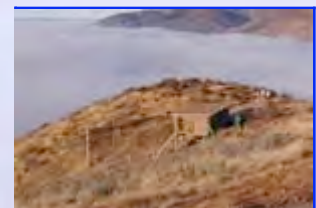
--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, August 2003:



Pinnacles Update

Construction of the release facility at Pinnacles is near completion. We are currently preparing to transfer the condor chicks at the Big Sur facility to Pinnacles on September 10, 2003.



Big Sur Update

The satellite GPS transmitters attached to condor Or99 and 179 are functioning as planned. Condor Y79 has remained very close to the Big Sur release site since receiving his GPS tag. The GPS locations for Y79 have been able to reveal very precise movements within a small area, something previously not possible. Condor Or99, on the other hand, was a bit more adventurous and decided to head south. His GPS locations revealed a distinct flight path down to southern California. This is the most accurate tracking of a condor's movements in the state of California to date. Initial GPS data on both condors has incredible implications for long-term management of condors and their land use. We will keep you posted on the performance of the GPS tags throughout the test phase.

The remainder of the wild flock is predominantly in southern California. Condors Y79, Or8, Or9, B64, and B71 returned to Big Sur during August. Condor B71 arrived shortly before her mate, B64. We were excited to see this pair return to Big Sur, the next breeding season is just around the corner and these two could potentially nest and produce an egg in Spring 2004. The youngsters (R36, R42, R51, R56) in the Big Sur wild flock stayed close to home. They have made considerable progress with the absence of the older condors and have been able to build up their confidence at the feeding sites. Condor R56 made a short, but significant, flight north into the Big Sur Valley. Their movements should increase quite a bit by next summer as they join the older condors on the journey to southern California.



Condor viewing in Big Sur -- The Ewoldsen Trail at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Good luck and until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, July 2003:

July was a hot one as temperatures soared into the lower 100's at the Big Sur release site. The field crew kept a watchful eye on the captive flock in the release pen, providing ample water on the extremely hot days this month. During these heat spells we also provide ample amounts of supplemental water to the wild flock. We built a naturalistic rock pool for the wild birds near the release site to provide them a year-round source of water. Condors can withstand 2-3 weeks without food, but can only last a week or two without water.



Seven (Condors B64, Y79, Or99, R36, R42, R51, R56) of the twenty Big Sur wild flock remained near the release site for most of July. The other 13 Big Sur condors remained in southern California at the Sespe Condor Sanctuary near Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge. Those 13 condors are currently being monitored by the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Condor Field Crew. They also are monitoring an additional 21 resident condors in

that same area. We commend the USFWS field crew for all their hard work and dedication to the entire California flock during these swings in the population. We're hoping the 13 Big Sur condors start getting a little homesick and return to Big Sur by the end of August.

Condor R36, a two-year old female, is currently being held in the release pen with the captive flock, acting as a wild mentor to the six young condors. She has already become very social with the captive flock, including adult condor mentor, R63. We plan to re-release R36 in early August.



Pinnacles Update: Construction of the new condor release pen is underway at Pinnacles National Monument. We plan to transfer the six condors being held at the Big Sur release pen to the Pinnacles pen in mid-September 2003 and release them in mid-December 2003. The Pinnacles condor release site is collaborative effort

between Ventana Wildlife Society and the National Park Service. We are currently midway through the construction of the release pen and we have almost completed the water system that will supply the release pen with water. We plan to complete construction of the new release pen by the end of August.

Condor Viewing in Big Sur Try the Ewoldsen Trail in Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park or the Highway One Vista Point pullout a mile north of Julia Pfeiffer Burns SP. Watch the ridgelines closely and don't forget to bring some binoculars or a spotting scope. Until next month....



--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, June 2003:

A majority of the Big Sur condor flock flew to southern California this month. The only condors that didn't make the journey south were the youngest in the flock -- R36, R42, R51, and R56. These four young birds and condors B64, B71, W19 were re-released back into the wild on June 4, 2003, after being held for West Nile Virus vaccination. (For background information on West Nile Virus, please visit the Center for Disease Control's West Nile Virus web page, www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/.)



A full-scale recapture effort was undertaken from June 10-12, 2003 at Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge. The purpose of this recapture was to vaccinate the remainder of the wild condor flock from the West Nile Virus,



change any expired radio transmitters, and test blood-lead

levels for each bird. Condor biologists from US Fish & Wildlife Service, Ventana Wildlife Society, National Park Service, and Los Angeles Zoo (LAZ) took part in the recapture.



On June 11, 2003, we recaptured twenty-three condors from the wild flock, eight of which were from the Big Sur flock (B70, Y90, Y92, Y94, Or8, Or9, W22, W31). The following day we captured eight additional condors, three of which were from the Big Sur flock (B61, B67, B68). Condor B70 was the only Big Sur condor that tested high for blood-lead and was transported to LAZ for an x-ray on June 12, 2003. A total of three condors were sent to the LAZ from the southern flock, one for high blood-lead and two for leg injuries.

Condor B70, a six-year-old male, was examined by veterinarian staff upon arrival to LAZ and his x-rays revealed no lead particulate in his digestive tract, which was great news. Results from different blood tests were still pending and B70's health condition appeared to be good. On June 15, 2003, LAZ staff went to check on B70 in the morning and found him dead on the floor of the holding pen. B70's untimely death was a shock to the entire recovery program and indeed a tremendous loss for the wild flock. Cause of death is still unknown at the moment and we are awaiting necropsy results.

Condor B70 had a distinct personality and will be remembered for setting the pace for the entire wild flock we now have in Big Sur. B70 and the other four blue tags were the 'Condor Dream Team.' They were the first condors released into Big Sur back in December 1997 and proceeded to pave the way for all the condors that followed. Condor B70 was a true survivor and his will to live inspired us all. He will be missed.



Activity in the release pen has heightened with the presence of wild condors Or99 and Y79. Both Or99 and Y79 are being held temporarily for high blood-lead. Condor mentor R63 and the six young condor chicks have adjusted very well to the two newcomers. Feeding behavior amongst the chicks has been



noticeably more aggressive since Or99 and Y79 joined them. There are no longer any free meals; all the of the chicks have to muscle their way in for a piece of the carcass.



Condors Or99 and Y79 were attached with the first Solar-powered GPS tracking tags. The GPS tag attaches to the condor wing exactly like the radio tag. The GPS tags could potentially revolutionize how we track condors. The GPS tag will obtain eight locations per day as well as the elevation and heading/direction for each location. Every third day the GPS tag uploads the stored locational data to a satellite, which then

transmits the information to a base station. The base station then sends that information via email to Ventana Wildlife Society's field office in Big Sur where biologists can then download and map out the locations and determine condor movements. The GPS tag locational data is accurate to less than 10 meters and will provide the most efficient data to date on condor movements.

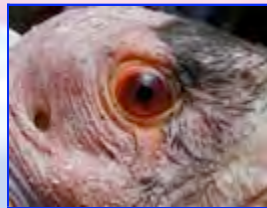
The Big Sur Condor Field Crew kept busy this month observing and managing the wild flock.

Crew Notes: Ryan Smith joined the condor crew as an Intern in September 2002 and became Lead Intern in March 2003. Ryan finished up his lead internship at the end of June and is moving on to work as kayak/nature guide in the Monterey Bay. We wish Ryan the best of luck in his future endeavors. Our newest crew member, Melanie Banville, started as an intern in June. Jessica Steffen is our new Lead Intern, Nora Toth is our Rearing Assistant, and Eric Stover is our Field Assistant.

The best condor viewing in Big Sur can be found at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Try the hiking to the Water Fall (light hiking) or head up Ewoldsen Trail (moderate hiking). Don't forget your binoculars. Until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

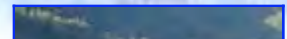
Notes from the Field, May 2003:



Summer finally arrived to Big Sur in May with rising temperatures and soaring condors. The Big Sur condor flock welcomed the change in weather and made some big movements (200+ miles!) to Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge in southern California. Condors B64 and B71, a newly formed pair this past year, abstained from the southward journey and remained together in Big Sur for a majority of the month. As did the newly released (December 12, 2002) red tags, who spent their time combing the ridgetops near the release site, never straying too far from home. Condors Or4, Or8, and W22 flew south toward the end of the month and still remain there with condors B61, B67, B68, B70, Y79, Y90, Y92, Y94, Or9, and W31.

More than half of the Big Sur flock are in southern California and spending valuable time with condors from the southern flock. The mixing of the Big Sur and southern flocks is beneficial to both subpopulations. A great exchange of social information occurs among the two groups as well as the potential formation of new condor pairs. The two subpopulations are now essentially becoming one California population with a current range very similar to the historic range prior to 1980, which is one of the goals of the condor restoration effort.

On a down note, the youngest condor in the Big



Sur wild flock, R60, was found dead at the release site on May 20, 2003. R60 had to be recaptured in February 2003 due to his lack of feeding in the wild. In early April, after showing signs of improvement in captivity, R60 was re-released back into the wild. R60 fed well in April, but slowly began to creep back into his old habits in early May.



He was staying away from the other condors and would not make aggressive attempts to feed, even when alone at a carcass. In early May, worried that he may be sick, we decided to recapture R60 and had two different traps in place at the release site to do the job. Although R60 was always close by, he never approached either trap or made any attempt to feed up to his death. R60's body is currently under examination at San Diego Zoo Hospital. R60 was the lowest ranking member in the wild flock hierarchy and he had an uphill battle from the beginning. The loss of a condor is always a hard pill to swallow, but we can feel better knowing R60's short-lived influence on the Big Sur condors only strengthened the flock as a whole.



West Nile Virus (WNV) is spreading west across the nation and may show up in California this summer. (For background information on West Nile Virus, please visit the



Centers for Disease Control's West Nile Virus web page, www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/). WNV is potentially life-threatening to condors, and in response, the Condor Recovery Team has decided that all condors need to be vaccinated for protection from the WNV.

We successfully recaptured seven condors (B64, B71, W19, R36, R42, R51, R56) from the Big Sur flock at the end of May. These condors will be held for seven days, receiving an initial vaccination upon capture and then a second 'booster' vaccination upon release back into the wild. We will continue recaptures until the entire wild flock is protected from WNV.



The best condor viewing can be found along the Big Sur coast at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. The summer conditions are very conducive to condor flight and your best bet is to watch the ridgeline east of the coast and Highway One. Good luck and until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, April 2003:

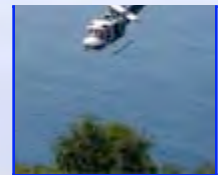


Big Sur became a little safer for condors this month after local power company, Pacific Gas &





Electric, replaced and retrofitted a power transmission line near the condor release site. The new transmission line was fitted with



plastic bird diverters, making it easy for condors (especially young ones) to spot the line from a greater distance and avoid collision. This power line replacement was in response to the death of condor 254 in February 2003. Condor 254 died of electrocution after a midair collision with the previous transmission line.



This summer we will be fitting selected condors with GPS satellite tags and mapping condors' movements more accurately than ever before. Ventana Wildlife Society is



optimistic this precise GPS locational data on the Big Sur flock will allow us to locate other potentially hazardous power lines within their current range before it's too late.

On Tuesday, April 15, six one-year old condors were transferred from San Diego Wild Animal Park's Captive Breeding Facility to Ventana Wildlife Society's Big Sur release site. These six condors (W65, W66, W70, W78, W86, W87) will be released at Pinnacles National Monument in fall 2003. They will be held in the Big Sur release pen with condor adult mentor, R63, approximately three months and then transferred (including R63) to the Pinnacles NM release pen this summer. All six of these condors have settled in well since transfer and are a very social and cohesive group. Condor mentor, R63, as always, received the new batch of condors with the ease and discipline of an adult. He quickly established the dominant presence over the flock and has set the pace for the new group. Nora Toth, Ventana's Condor Rearing Assistant, has already observed a hierarchy in the works with the new batch. She noted that W65 is vying with condor W87 for the slot below adult R63. Condors W66, W86, W70 are hovering in the middle of the hierarchy, while W78 appears to be at the bottom. These rankings could all change over the next couple of months as the condors gain more confidence and knowledge in the release pen.

The wild flock did not allow April showers to dampen their large-scale movements to southern California. Condors B61 and Y92 remained down south the entire month as they did in March. Condors B70, B71, Y79, Y90, Y94, Or99, Or4, Or9, W19, W22 and W31 made the journey to southern California, approximately 200 miles (one way).

The most notable journey was flown by condor B71. This flight away from Big Sur confirmed her attempt to nest with condor B64 was not going to happen this season. If they were incubating an egg she would not necessarily wander so far from their territory. Still quite young at six years in age, B64 and B71 have just begun their breeding life together and like other species, they will have to grow more mature and gain more knowledge before they can successfully raise their own young.

The southern flock has one pair (see [Pair 4 below](#)) currently incubating an

egg. Here is the March/April 2003 nesting update from the southern California flock, provided by US Fish & Wildlife Service:

Pair 1 (unpaired female #108): #108 remained unpaired following the loss of her previous mate (#100) in Sept 2002. During March male #107 displayed and copulated with her on a number of occasions.

Pair 2 (#98 & #155): Although male #98 and female #155 had been spending more and more time in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary, by the end of the March it appeared likely that the pair were going to skip breeding in 2003. Few displays and no copulations between the pair were documented.

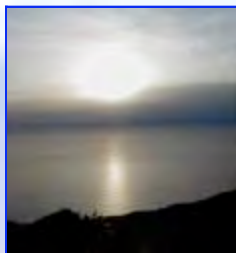
Pair 3 (#107 & #112): Male #107 displayed and copulated with #112 throughout the month of March as well as attempting copulations with females #108 and #156. However, the pair was spending relatively little time in and around their breeding area in the latter half of the month.

Pair 4 (#125 & #111): The new pairing of male #125 and female #111 produced the first and only egg of the season on Mar 6-7. This pair continues to incubate and the egg is due to hatch in early May 2003.

The best condor viewing in Big Sur for May 2003 can be found at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Highway one pull-offs between Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and Julia Pfeiffer Burns are also a good bet. Good luck and until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, March 2003:



March showers slowed a majority of condor movements this month, but they didn't keep the entire Big Sur flock grounded. Condors Or4, Or9, Or199, Y94, B68, W22, and W31 made flights south, well out of the Big Sur homerange. W31 and Or99 returned to Big Sur after flying to San Luis Obispo, but the remaining condors continued on to join up with the southern condor flock at Hopper Mountain Wildlife

Refuge.

Big Sur condors Y92 and B61, both females, continue to reside in southern California and we believe they may be seeking males from the southern flock for breeding. Y92 has been observed with condor AC-9 (AC-9 was the last condor captured from the wild back in 1987) conducting courtship rituals. B61 has also been observed conducting courtship rituals with different males, but doesn't appear to have chosen a mate yet.



In Big Sur, Condors B64 and B71 kept the entire field crew on edge this month as we await a first possible nesting attempt by





this pair. Still no guarantee on what this pair will do this year, but by the looks of their breeding



behavior, a nesting attempt is a definite possibility.

Considering that these birds have a life span of 50-60 years and B64 and B71 are only 6 years old, they still have quite a bit of time to perfect their nesting skills.

Our youngest and newest members to the flock, the red-tags, continue to follow the lead of their wild mentors. Condor R56 joined condors Y79, W19, and Or99 on flight approximately 25 miles north of the release site along the coast range. The northern route is less traveled by the Big Sur flock and this was indeed a challenging and notable flight for young R56 to embark on. R36, R42, and R51 continue to rise to the occasion and battle it out with the older condors for food. Not only is it difficult for these young condors to locate a carcass, but after they find it they have to wait for their turn to feed. Condor R60, the youngest of the red tags, was not adjusting well to the later part of this feeding equation and is still being held temporarily in the release pen until he builds up more feeding confidence. In the release pen R60 is able to feed and build confidence with R63, the adult condor mentor. We plan to re-release R60 back into the flock after his feeding performance is that of other red tag condors, hopefully by early April 2003.

The condor field crew continues to manage and observe the Big Sur flock around the clock. Our newest condor intern, Morgan Abbott, from Santa Cruz, California, started this month and is adjusting well to life in the field. Eric Stover (Field Assistant), Nora Toth (Rearing Assistant), and Ryan Smith (Lead Intern) round out the rest of the crew and continue to care for the condors day or night, rain/snow or shine.

The best condor viewing opportunities this month can be found at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Two spots within this State Park could yield good results -- 1) at the entrance of the park looking east along the coastal ridges, or 2) the upper exposed portions of the Ewoldsen trail. Good luck, until next time...

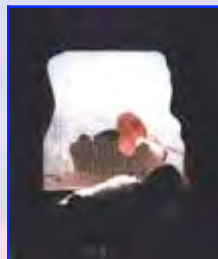
--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, February 2003:

February brought much needed rain to Big Sur after a very dry January. The increased moisture limited large-scale movements by the Big Sur condors and kept the core of the flock close to home.

The field crew observed more condor breeding behavior this month, the majority of which was observed between condors B64 and B71, who are still the most active adult pair. Field team member Ryan Smith observed courtship/display behavior this month by two younger condors, Or99 and Or4. These two 4-year old males still don't have a complete understanding of breeding behavior and seem to be mimicking the adults. As for other breeding behavior, 5-year old female Y94 has yet to choose a mate. Two adult 6-year old males, B70 and B68, are still battling to win her over.

The red-tag condors, released December 12, 2002, are adjusting fairly well to their Big Sur home. Young females, R36 and R56, have been surprisingly aggressive at feeding sites and get their fair share of the carcass. Prior to release these two females weren't nearly as aggressive in the flight pen, but have stepped up in post-release life. Male R42 has definitely established his presence in the Big Sur flock, taking flights with the older condors. The same could be said for male condor R54, who also spent a lot of time flying with older condors. This can be dangerous for young, inexperienced condors whose lack of flying experience and skill can quickly get them in trouble. This was the case this month for condor R54, who followed the older condors into "experts only" flying terrain below the release site. While navigating this difficult flight terrain R54 collided with a power line and was electrocuted and died. A bitter loss to the Big Sur flock, R54 was a very promising young condor. We are currently working with the local power company to reduce power line collisions by placing visual markers to the lines so condors can see them before it's too late. This was the third condor from the Big Sur flock to die after colliding with a power line.



Another sad story from southern California's condor flock. The US Fish and Wildlife Service, working closely with California Department of Fish and Game, is investigating the senseless shooting and killing of AC-8 (Adult Condor #8), one of the last California Condors taken into captivity in the 1980s and a matriarch of the captive-breeding program. AC-8 was found dead on February 13, and a subsequent necropsy determined she died of gunshot. Just before returning to the wild, AC-8 served as a condor mentor to the orange tags here in Big Sur. We were honored to have such an incredible bird be a part of our rearing program. We called her "Grandma" because she was the matriarch to half our condor flock. She also carried with her the ancient knowledge of the original wild flock and we hoped to have her pass on that valuable information to the new generation of condors. A sad way to go for such an incredible and beautiful condor. If you any information regarding AC-8's death, please call 916-414-6664 (reward offered).

Young males R51 and R60 remained in the release pen with the adult mentor, R63, for the entire month. Both condors were brought in from the wild temporarily for health concerns related to their lack of feeding. Both of these condors have fully recovered and will be re-released in early March.



The condor crew recently acquired two new field staff. Nora Toth came all the way from Hungary to assist with the prerelease monitoring and rearing of condor chicks. Ted Coriell, from Pennsylvania, just started as a field intern. Ryan Smith, from Iowa, continues as our senior intern and Eric Stover, from California, is our senior field assistant. We would like to thank Jonathan Carpenter and Erin MacDonald for all their hard work as interns over the last year and wish

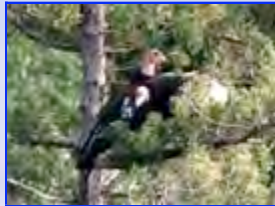
them luck in their future endeavors.

The best condor viewing can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur and Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Both Parks offer a wide range of hiking trails to get you to great vistas where condor viewing would be the best. Try Ewoldsen or Buzzard's Roost trails. Good luck, until next time...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Notes from the Field, January 2003:

January was unusually warm and summer-like with an abundance of clear, sunny days. The break in the weather gave the condors a chance to dust off their wings and make some good flights. It also gave the some of the adult male condors a chance to establish pair bonds with the adult females.



Adult condors B64 (male) and B71 (female) appear to be the first pair bond this season. We have witnessed these two together everywhere they go; they are almost inseparable.



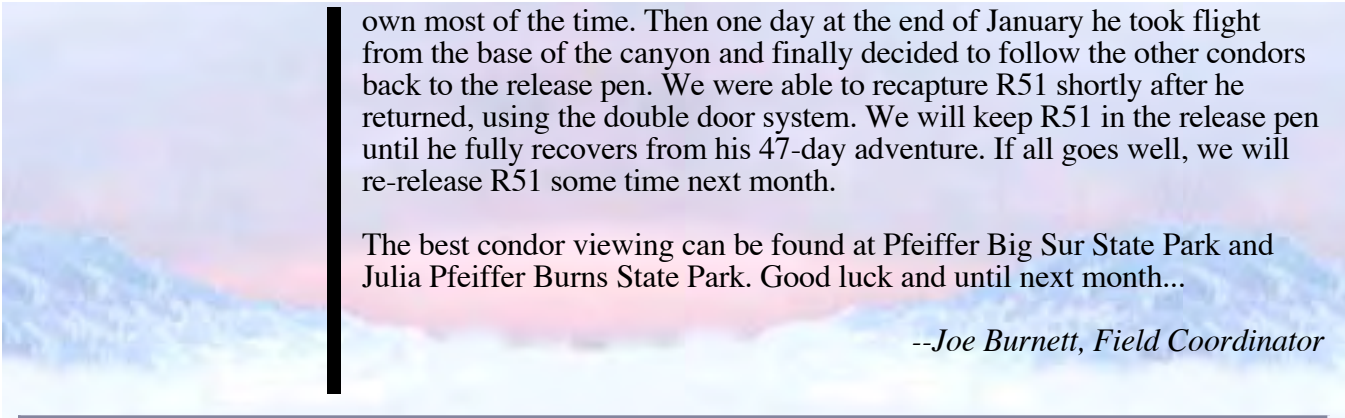
Ventana Wildlife Society founder and field observer, Sal Lucido, observed B64 and B71 conduct an elaborate courtship ritual on redwood tree branch, which led to an eventual copulation attempt. Although these two have never attempted to nest, there is still a fair chance they could pull it off this year.

The only other potential pair bond in Big Sur exists between condor Y94 (female) and B70 (male). Field team member, Jennifer Gamber, observed B70 courtship display, with wings out and head down, to Y94 in a redwood tree close to the release site, but observed no copulation attempt. Condor B68 (male) is still in the picture; he has been seen grooming with Y94, but has not been observed courtship displaying to her. An even crazier twist to the 'love triangle' is that Y94 recently conducted a courtship display to adult 'mentor' condor, R63, at the release pen. It seems Y94 still hasn't made up her mind among these three males.

This month was very eventful for the red tags, the latest additions to the Big Sur flock (released Dec. 12, 2002). One-year-old female R56 made a lengthy flight from the release site to the Big Sur Valley. A group of older condors, led by Or4 (a three-year-old male), showed her the way. Condors R36, R42, R54, R60 are feeding well and have made significant flights in and around the release site, but have yet to journey far from home.



Condor R51 finally returned to the release site after spending 47 days at the base of the canyon below the release site. He spent most of those days just sitting in a redwood tree and making very short flights, never climbing above to join the other condors that were very close by. The older condors would fly by and keep company on occasion, but he was on his



own most of the time. Then one day at the end of January he took flight from the base of the canyon and finally decided to follow the other condors back to the release pen. We were able to recapture R51 shortly after he returned, using the double door system. We will keep R51 in the release pen until he fully recovers from his 47-day adventure. If all goes well, we will re-release R51 some time next month.

The best condor viewing can be found at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. Good luck and until next month...

--Joe Burnett, Field Coordinator

Ventana Wildlife Society

19045 Portola Dr. Ste. F-1

Salinas, CA 93908

Phone 831-455-9514

Fax 831-455-2846

E-mail info@ventanaws.org

Illustrations copyright © 2007 Ventana Wildlife Society

Last updated February 7, 2004