



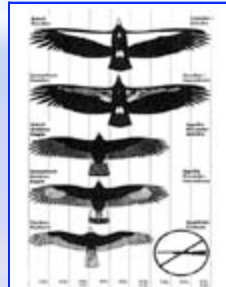
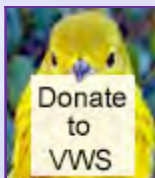
Ventana Wildlife Society CONDOR REINTRODUCTION NOTES FROM THE FIELD, 2006



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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.



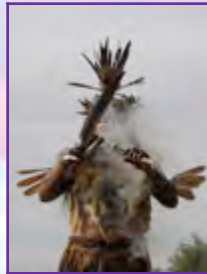
View [video clips](#) of California Condors released by Ventura Wildlife Society.

Notes from the Field, December 2006:

The last month of the year has been a busy one for the condors. As winter weather patterns have set in across condor country, the older birds have begun their courtship rituals, giving us all high hopes for the upcoming breeding season. We suspect at least 4 pairs of birds have already chosen each other as mates in the Big Sur flock.

We continued testing the condors' blood for elevated levels of lead this month, and we are happy to report that all birds in the Big Sur flock were released without needing further treatment or observation. This is great news, but does not mean the end to our worries about lead. In the last days

of the month the condors were treated to a pleasant surprise when a sea lion washed up along the rocky coast. Marine mammals seem to be one of the condors' favorite foods, and it had been several months since the last one floated ashore.



Things were also very busy at the release site this month. Work continued on our consolidated rearing pen, with everyone on the crew pitching in to help. When the pen is completed it will hold birds for different release sites



across the state. On December 8th a film crew from public television station KQED traveled with us to the release site. Along with the film crew we were joined by Mati Waiya, a representative of the Chumash Indian Tribe; State Assemblyman Pedro Nava; and VWS Executive Director Kelly Sorenson. The film crew was able to get some great shots of condors. Assemblyman Nava and Mr. Sorenson both gave interviews concerning the lead issue with condors, and Mr. Waiya performed a blessing of the release site while wearing traditional Chumash dress.

We would also like to let everyone know that the exhibit *Bringing the Condors Home* is now on display at the Oakland Museum of California. The exhibit was previously displayed at the Hearst Castle and the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. It will be on display in Oakland until April 15.

-- James Hart

Notes from the Field, November 2006:



The annual post-hunting trap up of the condors has been in full swing this month. Each year after hunting season, the condors are all trapped and their blood is tested for exposure



to lead. Game animals shot with lead ammunition are the main source of lead poisoning in condors. By testing them immediately following hunting season, we can often treat those condors that have been exposed before their condition becomes fatal. Many guests have joined us at our trap ups this month including the BBC film crew and a journalist from the Carmel magazine, in an effort to help us get the message out about the condors and lead poisoning. We have successfully tested nearly the entire flock and will continue until all of the birds are in the clear. We are happy to say that all of the condors that have been tested are now back out in the wild and enjoying the beautiful weather we have had this month!

The new consolidated rearing pen is really taking shape, and we have been

steadily working on this project in hopes of holding chicks this spring. The crew and many volunteers have been working so hard on this pen and we are proud to have such dedicated help with the construction of our pen. The new blind was assembled this month, as well as the water system and bath -- it won't be long now before this project is complete!

The wild flock from Pinnacles National Monument are still spending time in Big Sur, and now 12 of the 13 individuals have made it over to join up with our flock! We truly enjoy seeing all of the birds meeting up with one another and beginning to explore the Los Padres National Forest, which provides wonderful nesting and foraging habitat for the birds. The onset of nesting season will begin in December, and we will be seeing a change in behavior with the older birds. Perhaps these condors will find a good nest site during their travels ... to be continued!!

-- Sayre Flannagan

Notes from the Field, October 2006:

Indian summer has been in full swing in Big Sur, providing beautiful, sunny weather and lots of great thermals for the condors. The birds have been spending a lot of time on the coast, and many visitors have been privileged enough to see these magnificent birds in flight. We remind all of the viewers to remain a safe distance from the condors and discourage approaching them.



The crew has begun trapping up the flock for a routine post-hunting season exam. We caught and tested eight of the birds at the end of October and are currently holding two with suspected high lead. We plan on re-testing their blood and hope that they will be safely released soon. The testing process will continue through the month of November until all of the birds have been captured and examined. We were joined at our trap up by the BBC, who plans on airing the procedure in hopes of gaining more awareness about the condors.

A bi-annual field meeting was also held this month in Big Sur, in which folks from the other condor field sites got together to discuss each site's progress. The turnout was great and a lot of progress was made in working toward our goal of re-establishing this species in the wild.

The crew said goodbye to intern Thomas Juhasz at the end of this month. Thomas successfully completed his internship and did an outstanding job. He will be traveling this winter and then hopes to continue a career working with the condors. Good luck, Thomas!

-- Sayre Flannagan

Notes from the Field, September 2006:

The beautiful weather this September allowed for ample flying for the birds. The Pinnacles' birds continue to travel this way regularly, now making Big Sur one of their frequent stomping grounds. Many visitors along highway one were fortunate enough to see the condors lapping up the perfect thermals and soaring for long periods of time. The Monterey Bay Birding Festival this month sent birders to Big Sur, and we were lucky to show them all a condor in the wild!



The crew is still working hard on renovations at base camp as well as the construction for the consolidated rearing pen. Once the pen is finished, we will be able to hold more chicks for release in California next spring!

Six presentations were given during the bi-annual Ventana Wildlife Society staff conference that was held this month. Staff conferences give our organization a chance to catch up with each other and what we are currently researching. A lot was learned, and a wonderful time was had by all.

We also had a new intern arrive this month, Leif Burhans. Leif graduated from University of Florida and has made the long drive to come join our team, and we are so happy he did! We had to say goodbye to intern Tom Czubek this month. Tom has been a part of the condor crew since March, and will be sorely missed. Good luck, Tom.

The condors really took advantage of September's wind currents!

-- Sayre Flannagan

Notes from the Field, August 2006:

The condor crew welcomed many volunteers this month to help prepare for the building of our new rearing pen. Once the pen is completed, it will be used to hold condor chicks for a few months before they are ready to be released into the wild. We are all very excited for this pen, as it will be a wonderful place to hold these birds. For now we must focus on getting the area ready for construction. Clearing brush and digging trenches can be hard work, and we were very grateful for these amazing workers! A crew from the Hi Mountain lookout in San Luis Obispo County spent 3 days in the heat at camp, doing a tremendous job. The following week a large group from the Santa Barbara Zoo volunteered their time, tackling many projects! A huge thanks goes out to these volunteers for their hard work! We couldn't do it without them!

The birds have been moving around Big Sur quite a bit, being spotted as far

north as Palo Colorado canyon! The crew has been working hard at spreading out the food for the birds, which will encourage them to establish a more natural foraging strategy. We will continue to experiment with new feeding sites in the hopes of greater movements.

The crew also welcomed a new intern this month, Abbie Alterman. Abbie just finished a field job in Yosemite working with Willow Flycatchers, and we are very excited she joined our team!

-- Sayre Flannagan

Notes from the Field, July 2006:

The condor crew has been through a lot this month, with several of our newly released chicks facing the harsh realities of life in the wild. Condor 376 had a fatal encounter with the power lines on July 1st, which was very disappointing. PG & E will be coming to retrofit the lines that he collided with, as well as other potentially dangerous spans, to help reduce this problem. Condor 363 also had a great deal of trouble in the wild. The bird was located early this month in an emaciated state and died several days later. The crew did all they could to save him, but he was such a tough bird that he was difficult to capture until he was very sick. These losses are difficult for the crew, since we devote our lives to these birds, but we must push forward and concentrate on the rest of the flock.

The crew has also begun planning for the construction of our new rearing pen, to begin in August. The pen will house condor chicks received from the zoos for several months prior to their release into the wild. We have been working hard clearing a site for this pen to be built, as well as doing some home improvements to our cabin. The heat wave that hit the central coast this month has made working outdoors at the release site particularly challenging, with temperatures reaching 110 degrees!! We will keep pushing forward on this project and hope to have it completed in early fall. A big thanks goes out to the Santa Barbara Zoo for sending volunteers to help with this rearing pen -- we couldn't do it without you guys!

-- Sayre Flannagan, Condor Crew Supervisor

Notes from the Field, May 2006:

After our long stints of winter rain and springtime fog, summer sunshine has finally come to Big Sur. The beaming solar rays summon the blooming of wildflowers, the basking of lizards, and the goldening of the potrero slopes. Longer daylight hours allow plenty of time for our wild birds to soar and cruise the coastline in search of food ... and to cause mischief.





Earlier this month, only days after being transferred from Los Angeles Zoo, one of the new female chicks, #377, sampled a premature taste of the wild after escaping from a hole in the netting of the flight pen. Without radio tags or any means for us to track her, she slipped into the high-lying fog banks and disappeared into the mist. After several days of frantic searching, she was spotted flying farther up Anderson canyon above Eagle Peak, apparently falling in with some of our local wild birds. Rapidly picking up skills in the wild, she roosted in a snag near basecamp with #278, and even began feeding on the release slope with the other younger birds, fending for herself and procuring a crop of food. After several days of baiting the double-door trap, we were finally able to recapture our young escape artist to reunite her with her captive sisters.

In response to last month's discovery of the beached whale, a camera crew from television's Animal Planet arrived in Big Sur to film the condors feeding on the dead cetacean. VWS biologists Joe Burnett and Joseph Brandt led the way to the site, setting up a permanent blind to keep people inconspicuous while making important observations.



Last week, volunteers from the Santa Barbara Zoo came up to lend extra sets of hands to help with projects at basecamp, including restoring degraded trails, placing a condor snag, and preparing the site for our upcoming June condor release. Most recently, the interns spent several days hacking and chopping through thick stands of ceanothus and poison oak to construct a new access road for the soon-to-be-built consolidated rearing facility.

This month, we said goodbye to Michael Truex who recently departed for a job with the Forest Service in Cordova, Alaska. In turn, we welcomed to the project Thomas Juhasz from Pasadena, California. Already familiar with vultures, Thomas previously worked on a Eurasian Griffon project in Croatia. Michael - thanks for all your hard work! Thomas - welcome to the condor crew!

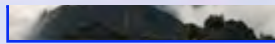
-- Ryan Choi, Species Recovery Intern

Notes from the Field, April 2006:

Big Sur Update



The month of April marks a shift in the seasons for us living here in Big Sur. What may hopefully be a final break from the downpours of the rainy season, we gratefully welcome the billowy fog banks that permeate the coastline. The towering mountain



peaks of the Ventana Wilderness soon become solemn island sentinels in a sea of rolling clouds.

High up above at basecamp the scenic view looks out upon an ocean of fog stretching to meet the horizon. Far down below, the lower elevations remain shrouded in a veil of impenetrable mist.

Earlier this month, Ventana staff members Sayre Flannagan and Joe Burnett joined up with other biologists from USFWS, NPS and the Peregrine Fund for the annual condor conference in Arizona. This yearly meeting allows for the ready exchange of ideas and management techniques among the different groups and locations. It is really quite wonderful to be reminded that all of our organizations are working together toward the success of a common goal.

In the world of the condors, we recently welcomed three new chicks and their mentor from the Los Angeles Zoo. They were placed in our flight pen, and have been readily adjusting to their new living arrangements. The new birds are the same age as the other juveniles we have in the pen. Hopefully, they will soon be ready to be released with the rest of our wild condor flock here in Big Sur!



In other news, another historical landmark was attained in the condor saga. For the first time since the 1805 Lewis and Clark Expedition, a group of condors were documented



feeding on a washed up Gray whale. A naturally placed food source, the birds have been observed feeding on the nutrient-rich blubber and oily flesh, which could be considered a delectable treat compared to their regular diet of calves and rabbits. While the smell of decaying cetacean is quite repulsive, it has attracted quite a number of hungry gulls, turkey vultures, and seabirds alike. A literal smorgasbord has appeared in Big Sur, and will presumably be around to feed many mouths for months to come.

If you have a high-speed Internet connection, you can watch this 10.7 MB [video of a condor approaching the dead gray whale](#) (mpg file).

For a feature story about the condors feeding on the beached Gray Whale, see the May 25, 2006 [Monterey County Weekly](#).

-- Ryan Choi, Species Recovery Intern

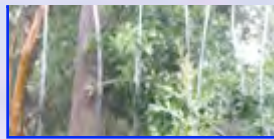
Notes from the Field, March 2006:

Big Sur Update



Already several months into the winter season, March





was hammered by several oceanic storm fronts. Erratic weather patterns struck the coastline, varying from sleet, hail, lightning, and



snow. Several large trees blew down across the Coast Ridge Road. Though the torrential conditions may have forced the birds to take refuge, the condors took full advantage of the driving winds and powerful gusts, aiding in their high soaring and aerial displays. What wonderful weather to be a condor!

Earlier this month, Ventana Wildlife Society held its seasonal Staff Conference at the Big Sur Station. The conference's theme of "Working with Endangered Species: Policy and Practice" drew a number of fascinating research presentations, from surveys of Spotted Owls in the Ventana Wilderness to proposals for shifting conservation policies in central California. The Species Recovery Program was proud to give two presentations, offering recommendations on future condor management practices.



In other news, the condor nest searching is well underway, headed up by our wildlife biologist Joseph Brandt. Through rain and snow, Joseph has been out there hiking across ridges, trekking down drainages, and swimming through poison oak to follow our potential breeding pairs to their roosting sites. All of the hard work paid off and Joseph

located condors 190 & 167 nesting in a redwood cavity. We will stay busy throughout April observing this nest site and keeping our fingers crossed that all goes well. Only time will tell! (See [KTVU news story](#) with video about the nesting condors.)

We also recently welcomed our newest intern to the condor team, Tom Czubek from Cincinnati, Ohio. Welcome, Tom!

-- Ryan Choi, Species Recovery Intern

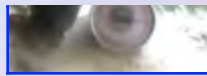
Notes from the Field, February 2006:

Big Sur Update



The weather has been a setback for the birds this month, with extremely high winds, rain, and snow!! The Big Sur release site is located approximately 2700 feet above sea level, and the





fierce winter storms left snow in our canyon. Our chicks in the flight pen were brave during this storm, which even left them dusted with

snow!

We are now fully into the breeding season, and the crew has observed some interesting behaviors by our couples in the wild flock. Complete copulations have occurred, as well as ingestion of bone chips (females eat them to obtain calcium for egg-laying)! Thank goodness we now have Joseph Brandt, our nesting biologist, to help during this busy time. Joseph joined the crew this month, and will be leading the crew on nesting strategies, in hopes of finding a successful nest! Another wonderful addition to our crew arrived this month, Michael Truex. Michael's hard work and determination is already shining through and we are thrilled to have him on the team!

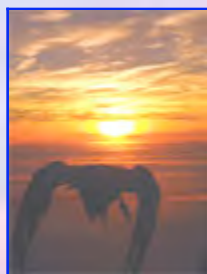
Pinnacles Update

This past month, condors 306, 312 and 330 crossed the central valley between Soledad and Salinas! They perched in the Sierra de Salinas Mountains, near Mt. Toro and near the San Clemente Dam. Essentially, they flew within 6 miles of the Salinas office and 9 miles of the Big Sur release site. The potential ramifications for dispersal and flock integration are obvious and very exciting. With the improving weather, I'd imagine this behavior and flight path will become all the more common. This means the goal of the two Ventana flocks joining as one seems to be closer than we thought before. Other than that, the birds have been continuing their routine of roosting in the High Peaks, feeding at Command Post on Facility Ridge prior to returning to the High Peaks (not terribly exciting but makes for nice and predictable viewing opportunities). It's a great time to get out to the Pinnacles and see the condors flying high! .

-- Sayre Flannagan and Court VanTassell

Notes from the Field, January 2006:

Big Sur Update



As every month does, January has had its ups and downs, weather, condor, and people-wise. It has been a cold, mostly dry month. Not much actual rain, just a fog that weighs enough to fall, and temperatures hovering just above the freezing mark. We had our first snow of the season up on the ridge around 3000 feet, and the crew has become reacquainted with Mr. Heater (a propane heater) on those chilly backcountry nights. Thus we were caught a bit off guard by that rogue week of warm weather in the 70s. Sunburns and snow in the same month!

This month we noticed the condors using some unaccustomed areas. This made tracking them down a creative process. It turns out you can use condor behavior to predict when a storm is coming. We've found that when a strong weather system is moving into the area, the condors hide from the storm (and from us!) in very steep and narrow canyons. Feathers are warm and waterproof, but they seem to plan ahead and seek out places out of the worst wind and rain.

The young birds we hope to release this spring in Big Sur are doing well, and have mostly adjusted to life in their large backcountry aviary. 363 is still the most dominant, so 376 and 375 continue to yield to him. 375 has become much more friendly with her fellow condors than she was at first, and now often eats peacefully with "tough guy" 363. 376 is starting to feel more assertive, and has taken to hissing and biting to defend his perch from 363 and 286. They are all in great health and are on the road to freedom.

Our flock has strong promise of an egg this year, with the flock acting like teenagers at summer camp. Last winter we had the following condor pairs: 167 and 190, 208 and 168, 194 and 171. These condor couples are still together this year, and there have been signs of interest in the opposite sex among the younger birds as well. The condor's breeding coloration is beautiful, with a bright pink spot on the neck and purple-blue sides, as well as a brightening of the natural yellow and pink head. Female and male California condors look identical to us, but the condors sure know the difference! Stay tuned next month for (hopefully) some juicier condor gossip.



The condor crew staff is changing. Mike Tyner rejoined us for the first half of January before being reassigned to the San Luis Reservoir Power Pole Survey. Our newest intern, Mr. Ryan Choi, hails from Bellevue, Washington. He graduated from Whitman College and comes to us fresh from the wilds of the Southeast Alaskan Flying Squirrel

Project for the Wildlife Society. We're excited to have him and look forward to an exciting and fun season.

After five years of working with the condors, Jessica Koning is moving on to prepare for graduate school. Her last day on the project is January 31, after which our own Sayre Flannagan will be rising to the challenge of taking over the field effort. Jess will stay in the area, and hopes to be a resource and volunteer observer in times of need. We are very excited for both of them: Excited to watch Jess move into a new phase in her life, and excited to see what Sayre has in store for the Condors.

Please wish our birds luck this breeding season, for their safety and their success at finding suitable breeding sites. Thank you!

-- Jim Howard, Species Recovery Intern

Pinnacles Update

As the winter season progresses, the hillsides continue to take on their lush green color and the condors fall into their winter routine. With increased rainfall and winds, the condors tend to remain close to home. This month, on a daily and almost invariable basis, the condors have been roosting in the High Peaks, flying to the feeding site in the morning, perching along Facility Ridge in the afternoon before making their way back to the High Peaks in the evening for roost.

Due to this routine, it is perhaps easier than ever to catch a glimpse of these magnificent birds. In the morning and late afternoon as the thermals are developing and fading the condors can often be spotted flying around their favorite roosts over the park's Condor Gulch and High Peaks trails. In the afternoon, after gorging themselves on calf carcasses, the condors can be spotted flying around the Gray Pines to the South of the park's overflow parking area (just East of the Pinnacles Campground). Please note, that if you are fortunate enough to see a California condor, keep your voice down, you're your movements to a minimum and always maintain a distance of at least 100 feet to ensure that this splendid species remains wild.

February, with its conscientious visitors, small crowds, pleasant weather and predictable condor movements, could prove to be a spectacular month for condor viewing.

-- Court VanTassell, Pinnacles Field Supervisor

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