

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

CALIFORNIA CONDOR

The California condor is North America's largest terrestrial bird, weighing up to 22 pounds with a wingspan of nine and a half feet. It can reach altitudes of 15,000 feet and may fly 140 miles a day in search of the carrion on which it feeds. Endangered Species Act protections have helped these magnificent birds to recover from near extinction.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

In prehistoric times, the condor ranged from southern British Columbia to Baja California and across the southern United States to Florida. By the time Europeans arrived in North America, however, the bird's range was limited to mountains along the Pacific coast, possibly due to the extinction of large Ice Age mammals.

In more recent history, the bird's decline can be attributed to shooting and lead poisoning. By 1940, only about 100 California condors remained, all confined to a U-shaped region in the mountains and foothills north of Los Angeles.

The California condor was federally listed as an endangered species in 1967. At the time, it was estimated that the entire wild population ranged from 50 to 60 individuals. When the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973, the California condor was included as an endangered species.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

In 1985, when the entire wild condor population had been reduced to nine birds, all of the remaining wild birds were brought into captivity in order to preserve the species through captive breeding and reintroduction. The last free-flying California condor was captured in April of 1987.

From 1987 to 1991, the entire population of California condors existed in two captive breeding facilities—one at the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the other

at the Los Angeles Zoo. Fortunately, California condors breed well in captivity, and by 1991 a sufficient number of California condors had reproduced to initiate a release program for the reestablishment of a wild population.

Reintroduction of California condors to the wild began on January 14, 1992, when two captive-reared juveniles were released along with two juvenile Andean condors into the Sespe Condor Sanctuary in California. Since then, other releases have occurred in California and Arizona.

CONSERVATION TODAY



Scott Frier/FWS

The California condor survives today thanks to captive breeding programs that brought the species back from the brink of extinction. Captive breeding programs continue today as do protection efforts in the wild. As of 2003,

there are 84 condors in the wild and 135 in captivity, up from 52 total in 1991.

ECOLOGICAL & ECONOMIC VALUE

The reintroduction of condors to northern Arizona and the Big Sur area of central coastal California has lured bird-watchers and other wildlife enthusiasts to these areas. These visits benefit local businesses that enjoy increased tourism revenues. At the Grand Canyon, where the birds are regularly seen, the National Park Service has created special programs that are offered daily to educate people about the plight of this magnificent species.

Ecologically, scavengers like the California condor play an important role in maintaining balanced and healthy ecosystems. By feeding on the remains of dead animals, scavengers help recycle nutrients.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The California condor has bounced back from its brush with extinction, but it will be some time before the species nears the point of full recovery. It is only through human intervention that the condor exists at all today and that work must be continued.

Captive breeding programs and the aggressive monitoring of wild populations are essential to preserving the condor for future generations.

Fortunately, the condor has come to symbolize what humans can accomplish when faced with the immediate extinction of an animal. Condor rescue and breeding programs continue to garner public support, and stories about condor recovery efforts still make headlines, further educating the public about how close we came to losing this amazing bird forever.



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