



BACKGROUND



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FAQ ABOUT CALIFORNIA CONDORS

A Conversation with Santa Barbara Zoo CEO Rich Block and Assistant Director of Conservation and Research Estelle Sandhaus, from April 15, 2009.

How long have condors been on the planet?

Rich: They soared in the skies during the Pleistocene era, which ended about ten thousand years ago. We can assume that they feasted on carrion of saber toothed tigers and mastodons. Their original range was a huge swath of land along the Pacific coastline, from British Columbia to Baja California.

Estelle: There have been fossil finds of condors in what is now New England and Florida too.

Rich: Lewis and Clark saw them and even shot one. But by the 1940s, the range was reduced to the coastal mountains of southern and central California.

Do condors have any natural predators?

Rich: As eggs and as young, they sure do! Ravens have been known to go after eggs. The chicks are at risk of possible predation by golden eagles, bobcats, and even black bears have attempted to get access to nests. The adults do some pretty dazzling flying defending their nests.

Estelle: Adults have to be careful when they feed, though, as they are vulnerable to possible attack by golden eagles, mountain lions, and bobcats.

Rich: Of course, their worst threat comes from humans.

Why did the number of condors decline so drastically, leading up to the Recovery Program's creation in 1975?

Estelle: It was a number of factors, most notably from human activities. They have been poisoned and shot, sometimes mistakenly. There were squirrel and coyote abatement programs that used baited (poisoned) carcasses that the condors got into. They were shot, in part for their feathers for use as quills, by early settlers. The hobby of egg collecting was very popular and may have impacted the birds; the practice wasn't banned until 1918. Collisions with overhead utility wires was another problem. But poisoning by lead appears to be a major factor, by consuming carrion that was contaminated with lead shot.

Weren't eggs and chicks being captured in the wild in the 1980s? What happened to those birds?

Estelle: Those birds really helped the captive breeding program by adding their genes to the collective breeding pool. They created a lot of eggs and a lot of condors. If a bird is suitable genetically and behaviorally, they may be released. AC9, the last wild-born condor captured for the

captive breeding program, was rereleased after 15 years in captivity. He's breeding in the wild now and has produced three chicks with his captive-born mate.

What was the lowest number the condor population dropped to and when was that?

Rich: We were down to 24 birds, total, in 1984. Before all the birds were captured for the Recovery Program in 1986, there were only five birds left in the wild, one breeding pair and three males. The rest were in captive breeding facilities at the Los Angeles Zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park.

Why was the decision made to capture all the wild condors in 1986?

Rich: It was incredibly controversial, that decision. There were two schools of thought. One was: if it is their time to go, let them go with dignity. The other was: human beings were the reasons for the decline, we owe it to them to try to save them.

Estelle: If we hadn't, they certainly would have died out. I think it was AC3's death that finally catalyzed the decision. She died a prolonged death from lead poisoning. By the time researchers were able to actually capture her and treat her, it was too late.

What were the goals of the Recovery Program after that?

Rich: Increasing egg production, for one. That's why so many of the early chicks were hand-raised using those condor puppets. If a condor pair loses an egg, often the female will lay another. That's called "double-clutching."

Estelle: Some can produce three eggs in a season. Multiple clutching really got the captive breeding program going strong in those early days.

There are pictures of condor chicks being fed by hand-puppets that look like adult condors. Why was this done? Is it still being done?

Estelle: It is still done because of the issue of "imprinting" – we don't want the birds to become too used to humans. We want them to think they are being raised by condors. As they get older, they are housed with other condors and human contact is really limited. That way, they can be released into the wild thinking they are birds and not people (she laughs).

Weren't Andean condors being used as foster parents during those early years? Are there condor foster parents?

Estelle: In the early years, the adult condors were too valuable to the breeding program to be rereleased into the wild, so researchers used their closest living relatives, Andean condors, as foster parents. The thinking was that the Andean condors could teach the California condor chicks how to live in the wild. The Andeans were released with the chicks and later recaptured. Now that the California condor numbers are up, they sometimes use adult condors who have lost an egg to raise chicks that aren't their offspring.

Rich: There are "mentor birds" that go in with young condors too, who teach them appropriate social behavior.

Are any breeding condors allowed to raise their own chicks?

Estelle: Sure. As the numbers go up, some parents do raise their own chicks. There are all kinds of strategies for dealing with raising the chicks, such as foster parents or hand-rearing, and they depend on what is best for the program.

Are any of the original wild condors still alive? Are any of them in the wild?

Estelle: You bet. The last condor captured in the wild, AC9, was released after 15 years in captivity during which he fathered 16 chicks. He's breeding in the wild now and has produced two chicks with his mate.

What were the initial challenges in rereleasing condors into the wild?

Rich: Early on, researchers didn't have enough information to understand all of the elements that are important for young condors' learning curves. We didn't know how much they learned about survival and condor etiquette from older birds. Peer groupings work well with mammals and some other birds, but not condors. Some of the first juvenile birds released acted a bit like rowdy teenagers in the wild. That's why there are now "mentor birds" with young condors before they are released.

Is there a projected date that the recovery effort will reach the "magic" number of condors in the wild? What happens then? Will the captive breeding facilities close down?

Estelle: The program goals are to have three separate sustainable populations in California and Arizona, each with 150 birds and at least 15 breeding pairs. That could happen by 2020. But those numbers really can change.

Rich: The main thing is that we need to have a safe environment for the birds to live in and that takes time. The ban on lead bullets just went into effect so the results may not be seen for a few years yet. In the meantime, we are building up the populations in several different areas.

Estelle: Separate populations are essential in case of disease or another calamity, so that the entire population wouldn't be at risk. Additionally it enables us to restore the condor to as much of its former range as possible.

Where are the captive breeding facilities and where are the release sites?

Rich: Condor breeding facilities are at the Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park, Oregon Zoo and the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, which is where our four birds were hatched.

Estelle: The number of release sites has grown. There are three active release sites in California, including Big Sur, Pinnacles National Monument and Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge; one in Arizona at Vermillion Cliffs, and one in Baja, Mexico.

Where are condors currently living in the wild and how well are those populations doing?

Estelle: There are populations near us in the Sespe Wilderness, in Big Sur, and a few birds at the Pinnacles National Monument, totaling more than 80 birds in California. There is a release site and 70 birds in Arizona at the Grand Canyon and this population now ranges into southern Utah. Then there are the 15 birds in Baja. We've been celebrating because the number of birds in the wild now totals more than the number in captivity. The total is over 320 birds. From 22 to 320 in 27 years. Wow.

How did banning lead bullets help wild condors? Do hunters shoot condors?

Rich: It will. It is still too early.

Estelle: The vast majority of hunters are passionate preservationists, they were the first stewards of many wild places. Unfortunately, poaching persists by a minority of lawless individuals.

Rich: Real hunters wouldn't "mistake" a condor for another species, like a turkey vulture, which is also illegal to shoot, or a wild turkey.

Why does the Recovery Program provide food for condors in the wild?

Rich: Right now, there is no guarantee that they are eating food that isn't contaminated by lead shot. Over time, this program will be reduced. But we have a huge investment in these birds. We have to preserve them.

Do condors who live in different areas "visit" each other?

Rich: Somehow they find each other. We've had birds released in Big Sur come visit the Sespe birds. I think we might get a wild bird over here to check out our condors. The wild birds go check out the release pens before releases. I've seen them sitting on top of the pens where the captive birds are waiting to be released.

Are wild condors breeding and do they make good parents?

Estelle: The number of wild nests has been going up in recent years. Last year, in our study area, we had five active nests. Four of those chicks fledged (took first flight) successfully and one had to be airlifted to the Los Angeles Zoo for emergency treatment. It had microtrash and lead in its system. But it has recovered and will be released soon. This season, as of April, we have four active nests. There are more in Big Sur and Arizona too.

Do researchers check on eggs and chicks in wild nests?

Estelle: Here, biologists or veterinary staff check the egg, and then the chick, every 30 days. It's a good thing too, and has increased the number of successful fledglings. A few years back, we had to airlift out a chick and one of our interns stayed in a biovac outside the nest to keep the adults from coming into the cave where the nest was. If they had discovered the chick was missing, they might have abandoned the nest. Within 24 hours, the chick was back and reunited with the parents. It eventually fledged successfully.

Why do we still need a captive breeding program?

Estelle: Currently, the wild population isn't self-sustaining.

Why can't all the captive condors be released into the wild?

Estelle: We've learned a lot from early releases and now know that some birds may not be suitable to be released into the wild. Experiences in the Grand Canyon and parts of California have shown us that condors interacting too closely with humans negatively affects the condors' abilities to survive independently in the wild.

Rich: That extends to all wildlife. In general it is a bad idea to approach wildlife too closely.

How did the Santa Barbara Zoo get condors?

Rich: About ten years ago we approached the Recovery Program and asked if we could help. They agreed, so we backed up our interest by having staff help with condor programs.

Estelle: Didn't we send our maintenance guys down to Baja to help build the release pens there?

Rich: We did that, we hosted Recovery Team meetings and did projects at Hopper Mountain. In 1999, our Board voted in favor of the concept of having a condor exhibit here. We were asked to become a partner in 2002. It made sense for us to display the birds because we are in the heart of condor country, had the space and the commitment to build a great exhibit – a showcase.

Will there be breeding at the Santa Barbara Zoo?

Rich: We are not set up for breeding here – we don't have the facilities or room for that. The plan is that we will have these four juvenile birds until they become mature, around ages six to eight, and then they will go to a breeding facility and we'll get new birds. Our birds are too closely related to breed with each other. If they did produce an egg, we'd send it to one of the breeding facilities.

Why don't the Zoo's condors have names?

Rich: In the early years, researchers gave the wild birds number designations, like AC3 and AC9. When birds started being hatched in captivity, they were given numbers in the "Condor Studbook," which tracks all the birds. The AC-numbered birds got new numbers at that time. The captive-born condors also got names from the Chumash language, which is the Native American tribe in this area. It can be confusing.

Estelle: It gets even more confusing as every facility had their own numbering program, as did the release sites. It's been standardized now with the Studbook. It is also much easier to identify a bird by a number than from a name. Try fitting "Preghawish" on a wing tag! The numbers contain information, for example they tell us the relative age of the bird.

Rich: You know, these aren't "our" birds, they are the Condor Recovery Program birds and ultimately belong to all Americans.

Don't condors need hundreds of miles to soar? How can they be happy in captivity?

Rich: They are flying those miles because they are foraging – looking for food. But they are very efficient fliers, actually they are gliders who can go miles on just one wing beat. We've designed our exhibit to give them a lot of stimulation. It is dynamic and things change and can move. There is a good glide path.

Estelle: The birds have been using parts of the exhibit, like the pools, the snags and the cave, just as we had hoped. They've been relaxed from day one – we haven't seen any signs of distress at all.

Rich: We still had some construction going on and someone was using a grinder. The birds didn't even seem to notice. We've allowed people to walk on the boardwalk and the birds have just taken it in stride.

Why is it important to "save" condors? Especially when their wild habitat is being encroached upon?

Rich: You know, it is as much symbolic as it is literally important. If we, as humans, can show that we can save a species on the brink of extinction, then we have made a difference. It shows that we can be successful. Condors are sort of an umbrella species, in order to save them, we have to save their habitat. If we save the habitat it saves every other plant and animal in that habitat. It's not just about helping condors either, it also helps people. We are learning that having lead in our environment isn't good for anybody. Most of the money comes from private sources – especially for the programs at the zoos and the Peregrine Fund. We haven't received any government money to create this exhibit. It is a passionate response from individuals and businesses to leave behind a legacy. The condor is on the California state quarter, along with John Muir and Half Dome. We don't want to have to explain to future generations what that bird is on the quarter.

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On Earth Day, April 22, 2009, the Santa Barbara Zoo opened California Trails, a new exhibit complex showcasing threatened or endangered California natives including critically endangered California condors plus Channel Island foxes, bald eagles, desert tortoises, and local raptors, reptiles and amphibians. With this exhibit, the Santa Barbara Zoo becomes one of only three zoos in the world to display California condors, a species which has rebounded from the brink of extinction. But there is still much work to be done to "save" all these species. For more information, visit www.sbzoo.org.

The Santa Barbara Zoo is open daily from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.; general admission is \$11 for adults, \$9 for children 2-12 and seniors 60+, and children under 2 are free . Parking is \$4.

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