



## BACKGROUND

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## ABOUT CALIFORNIA CONDORS

- The name condor is from the Spanish word *cuntur*, and is the Inca name given to the Andean condor.
- Condors are fastidious. After eating, they bathe in rock pools and will spend hours preening and drying their feathers. If no water is available, they will clean their heads and necks by rubbing them on grass, rocks, or tree branches.
- Holding in a steady horizontal position, condors can soar on warm thermal updrafts for hours, reaching speeds of more than 55 miles per hour and altitudes of 15,000 feet. Flights up to 150 miles in a day have been recorded.
- Condors are highly social, and inquisitive birds which often engage in play. Younger birds are especially curious and busy themselves at length with feathers, sticks, and grass (e.g. tug-of-war, tossing, chasing, and retrieving the objects), especially around water holes.
- Condors do not have vocal cords but they can make hissing and grunting noises.
- Condors defecate on their legs to reduce their core body temperature.
- When scared, condors regurgitate their stomach contents.
- Condor chicks are hatched with their eyes open.
- Juvenile condors do not take on the distinctive colored neck and head until they are sexually mature, at around six to eight years of age.
- Condor beaks are so powerful they can pierce the hide of a horse.
- Condors use their beaks to touch, feel, and explore their surroundings and sometimes to make better roosting and nesting sites.
- Condors do not have talons like eagles or hawks; their nails are more like toenails.
- The total world population of California condors was at its lowest at 22 individuals in 1982.
- As of December 2008, there were a total of 321 condors with more birds in the wild (167) than in captivity (154) for more than twenty years.

### **CONDOR RANGE AND HABITAT:**

As recently as the early 1800s, the California condor occupied mountains along the coast from British Columbia to northern Baja California. By the 1960s, the population declined to a small population in south-central California. Through captive breeding, California Condors have been reintroduced in several areas and have spread even further, enlarging their current range to Big Sur, mountains in southern and central California, the Grand Canyon and Baja California. They require large areas for foraging, roosting, and nesting. They roost on large trees or isolated rocky outcrops and cliffs.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

Males and females are similar and feature a mostly bald head and neck with the skin in shades of pink, red, orange, yellow, and light blue (the color changes with the birds' behavior). Feathers are mostly black, with white under-wing linings. One of the largest flying birds in the world, their wing spread is more than nine feet. They may weigh more than 20 pounds. The beak is long, sharp, and powerful.

### **BREEDING:**

California condors usually become sexually mature between ages six and eight. Males perform a highly ritualized courtship display in front of females; pairs stay together over successive seasons. Once paired, condors may take up to three years to begin breeding. They nest in caves among boulders on a cliff or hillside. The female lays a single aqua-colored egg on the cave floor. The parents share duties in keeping the egg warm during the 54 to 58 day incubation and then both care for the chick. Young condors learn to fly in about six months, but are dependent on their parents for one to two years, which usually prevents condors from breeding yearly.

### **DIET:**

Consists of medium and large-sized dead mammals in any state of decay like cattle, sheep, deer, horses, and marine mammals. Condors may travel several hundred miles in search of food. They find their food by sight or by following other scavenging birds. They typically feed in a group where a strict dominance hierarchy is followed, with the dominant birds eating first and taking the choicest carcass parts. On average, they consume two to three pounds of meat each time they eat.

### **STATUS:**

Condors are "critically threatened" according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The species has been protected under the Endangered Species Act since 1967 and by California state law since 1971. The population steadily declined to 22 birds in 1982, mainly due to shooting and poisoning. In 1984, the remaining wild condors were captured for captive breeding programs. By 1992, the first captive-bred California condors were reintroduced in California.

*Info courtesy of the California Department of Fish & Game, Oregon Zoo, and Ventana Wildlife Society.*

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*On Earth Day, April 22, 2009, the Santa Barbara Zoo opens 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](http://www.sbzoo.org).*