

California Condors

Return to Mexico

by Denise Stockton



A condor given the name *Xewe dines* on some road kill in its flight cage in Mexico prior to its release.

Photo by John Stockton

After a lengthy absence, California condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) have returned to Baja California. The largest bird in North America is now soaring the skies over Mexico for the first time in more than 60 years. The site chosen for this historic event is situated approximately 125 miles (210 kilometers) south of the California border in a remote area of the Sierra San Pedro de Martir National Park at an altitude of about 8,200 feet (2,500 meters).

The first three birds were released on October 9, 2002, with approximately 70 dignitaries, including biologists, zoologists, and other interested parties from both sides of the border, watching excitedly. However, the birds decided it was not a good day to fly. They remained in the flight pen oblivious to the open door and freedom. With only a handful of biologists present, the next day turned out to be a better one in which to take wing. This release is the first step in a long-term effort to reestablish condors in Mexico. It is also a step closer to the goal of the California Condor Recovery Program, which is to establish additional self-sustaining populations in historic condor range through the release of captive-reared birds.

The California Condor Recovery Program is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Zoological Society of San Diego, the Los Angeles Zoo, the Peregrine Fund, and the Ventana Wilderness Society. They are now joined by their Mexican partners, which include the Mexican federal government office of the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), the Instituto Nacional de

Ecología and the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, and the nongovernmental organization, Centro de Investigación Científica y de Educación Superior de Ensenada (CICESE). The Baja site is being managed by these cooperating Mexican organizations and assisted by the San Diego Zoological Society.

“Day after day we hear about species that are endangered or become extinct. Very few times do we receive news of a recuperation and conservation effort,” said Dr. Exequiel Ezcurra, President of the Instituto Nacional de Ecología. “This is why this day gives us reason to rejoice; 60 years have passed without condors in Mexico, and today we will see these birds open their wings where their ancestors once did.”

“Working hand in hand, across international boundaries with our Mexican partners, our effort to reintroduce California condors into Mexico represents a truly binational, holistic approach to restoring an endangered species throughout its historical range. The strong commitment of the condor management community in the U.S. and Mexico will help to insure the success of this long-term project,” states Marc Weitzel, Project Leader for the Service’s Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex and a member of SEMARNAT’s Technical Committee for the Reintroduction of the California Condor.

California condors are scavengers that have soared over mountainous areas of California since prehistoric times, but their numbers declined drastically in the 20th century. This was due in part to habitat loss, shooting, lead poisoning, and toxic substances used to poison predators. Condors were listed as an

endangered species in 1967. In 1982, the condor population reached its lowest level of 22 birds, prompting Service biologists to start collecting chicks and eggs for a captive breeding program. In 1992, the Service, through the Hopper Mountain Refuge, began releasing California condors back into the wild. Currently, the Service and its partners manage 74 condors living in the wild in California, Arizona, and now Baja California, Mexico. There are 126 birds in captivity at the breeding facilities for a total of 200 condors in existence.

Hopper Mountain has an agreement with the reintroduction project in Baja for the long-term loan of surplus field equipment. Mike Stockton, one of the refuge's condor biologists, drove the first of the much needed equipment (scopes, tripods, backpacks, etc.) down to Baja the last week of October. Stockton's arrival coincided with the delivery of a travel trailer that had been in use by Hopper Mountain field biologists and was no longer needed. The Mexican biologists had been living out of tents for months and were very pleased with their new accommodations.

Stockton was able to experience firsthand the challenges that the Mexican

biologists face as they get this infant program off the ground. A steady supply of carcasses to feed the condors is still being worked out, so in the meanwhile road kill and the occasional dead horse or steer donated from a neighboring ranch will have to do. The steep terrain, while perfect habitat for the condors, is proving to be a problem for the biologists on the ground trying to track the movements of the released birds. This became evident when the newly released birds moved down low into areas where the biologists couldn't follow, and they became concerned when the condors were not coming back up to the feeding site. It was decided to trap all of the birds even though one of them was adjusting well to the area. They plan to rerelease them for short periods of time until they become accustomed to the area. Two all-terrain vehicles that the Hopper Mountain Refuge sent should assist considerably with this situation.

Stockton spent the rest of the week with biologists sharing condor management experiences and extending an invitation to visit the Hopper Mountain NWR Complex. Juan Julian Vargas Velazco and Maria Catalina Porras Pena, the Mexican biologists, came to Hopper

Mountain in early February 2003 and joined refuge biologists in observing, feeding, and tracking condors on refuge and at off-refuge sites. From time to time over the next few years, refuge biologists will travel south to give technical support to the program in Baja.

Hopper Mountain NWR has been managing California condors for more than 10 years, and has worked closely with recovery program partners to develop and refine condor management methods. It is this wealth of firsthand knowledge that the refuge biologists will be sharing with their Mexican counterparts. Stockton was greatly impressed with the people he met during his stay in Mexico, "Everyone is 100 percent behind returning the California condor to this part of their historic range, from the local ranchers to the dedicated professionals and everyone else I came in contact with. I look forward to working with them again."

Denise Stockton is an Information & Education Specialist at the Hopper Mountain NWR Complex (telephone 805/644-5185 or email denise_stockton@r1.fws.gov).



Service biologist John Stockton and Mexican biologist Juan Julian Vargas Velazco track released condors in Mexico.

Photo by John Stockton