

Return to the Wild

by Jane Hendron



Photos by Scott Frier/Nikon Inc.

Since its inception in the 1970s, the California Condor Recovery Program has faced repeated challenges, controversies, and setbacks, but it remains focused on one goal: reestablishing healthy, self-sustaining populations of California condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) in the wild. This spring, high atop a ridge in the Los Padres National Forest's Sespe Condor Sanctuary, the recovery program ushered in a new chapter in its effort to secure the future of the California condor when it released one of the founding members of the captive-breeding flock back into the wild.

The female condor, identified as AC-8, was captured in 1986 in Kern County, California, and taken to the San Diego Wild Animal Park. After her capture, AC-8 was paired with AC-5, another original member of the breeding flock. The pair produced nine offspring. Two of AC-8's chicks were released to the wild in southern California, while the remaining offspring carried on her genetic line as part of the permanent captive-breeding population. AC-8 has not produced any additional fertile eggs since 1995, and staff at the Wild Animal Park's Condor Project suspect that she is now beyond breeding age. Although no one knows her exact age, she may be about 40 years old. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Condor Recovery Team determined that AC-8 should be allowed to return to the wild to live the remainder of her time as a free-flying condor.

On March 28, 2000, AC-8 was flown by helicopter from the Los Angeles Zoo to a temporary enclosure in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary. Two captive-bred

juvenile condors that were being released to the wild were placed into the enclosure with her. On April 4, the door to the enclosure was opened and AC-8 took to the sky for the first time in 14 years. The two younger condors were released at the same time.

AC-8's return to the wild is more than a sentimental nod in recognition of her years of service to the recovery program; it is an opportunity for captive-bred, reintroduced condors in the southern California population to interact with a wild, adult condor and to learn important skills necessary to survive in the wild. Greg Austin, Deputy Project Leader for the Service's Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Ventura, California, hopes that AC-8 "will do what she used to do and that the young birds will encounter her." But he acknowledges that her role as a mentor is not guaranteed. "Some of these birds will catch up to her," says Austin, "but we don't know what will happen as a result."

What recovery program biologists hope is that AC-8 will function as a guide bird for reintroduced condors inhabiting the mountains of southern California, teaching the young birds proper behaviors and leading them to historical roosting, feeding, and watering sites. AC-8 can no longer help her species in a breeding role, but as a potential mentor for young, inexperienced condors, she can help these reintroduced birds successfully adjust to life in the wild.

According to Austin, AC-8 was taking two-hour flights around the Sespe within four days of her release; after six days, she left the Sespe and biologists temporarily lost track of her. When refuge biologists reestablished contact with her, she was foraging in the Tehachapi Mountains in Kern County, close to the area where she last lived as a free bird.

Fifty-nine California condors now fly free in the wild, 34 in California and 25 in Arizona. It has been about 40 years since there were this many condors in the wild, but seeing condors in their natural habitat remains a hit-or-miss prospect, one often involving difficult hikes into rugged backcountry. However, people will soon have a better opportunity to observe these magnificent birds. This spring, the San Diego Wild Animal Park became only the second institution in the world to have California condors on display for public viewing. (In 1997, the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, became the first institution to place condors on display since the bird was listed as endangered in 1967.)

The Wild Animal Park's "Condor Ridge" exhibit focuses on native North American wildlife, with the endangered California condor as the centerpiece species. According to Mike Mace, Curator of Birds at the Wild Animal Park, "the exhibit will not only educate the public, it's also a functional unit of the captive-breeding program." The aviary will allow mature, non-releasable birds to interact socially with juveniles,

helping the young birds prepare for the time when they reach sexual maturity and are incorporated into the captive-breeding program. With more than 1.8 million visitors annually, Mace says "Condor Ridge will help keep the recovery program in the forefront."

Other species in the exhibit for which the Service is involved in restoration efforts include thick-billed parrots (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*), northern aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis septentrionalis*), black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*), and desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). Mace says the exhibit emphasizes the partnerships involved with conducting endangered species recovery programs and illustrates the importance of all species, regardless of their status.

The California Condor Recovery Program still has a long way to go, but thanks to the many partners in the effort, the future of this magnificent bird looks brighter all the time.

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To learn more about the condor and ongoing recovery efforts, check out the websites of some of the partners in the California Condor Recovery Program:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:
www.fws.gov

Zoological Society of San Diego:
www.sandiegozoo.org

California Department of Fish and Game:
www.dfg.ca.gov

Arizona Game and Fish Department:
www.gf.state.az.us

Los Angeles Zoo:
www.lazoo.org

The Peregrine Fund:
www.peregrinefund.org

Ventana Wilderness Sanctuary:
www.ventanaws.org

AC-8 flies to freedom in the wild.

