



Inside Grand Canyon

Condors at the Canyon Transcript by Rangers Marker Marshall and Pat Brown. April 2009

Marker Marshall

The California condor is a dramatic and a dramatically endangered bird. Grand Canyon National Park has become an important refuge for California condors and one of the best places on Earth to see them in the wild. In this podcast we'll first tell you more about these wonderful birds and then we'll talk about when, where and how to recognize them when you visit the park. I'm Park Ranger Marker Marshall...

Pat Brown

And I'm Park Ranger Pat Brown. And to tell you about the condors, first of all they are the largest soaring bird in North America. They have a wingspan of nine-and-a-half feet, about three meters. If they were perched they would be about waist high, and they can weigh anywhere from sixteen to twenty-two pounds. And they have these big wings because they're scavengers; they eat dead things, and you're just not going to find dead things everywhere in the landscape, so they find their food by sight.

Marker

The California condor is also a dramatically endangered bird. In 1982, the world total of California condors was just 22 birds; they were balanced on the brink of extinction. We probably don't know all the reasons for their decline. Certainly people have a bad habit of shooting condors, and at times egg collecting has been a big thing too. Habitat loss certainly played a role; maybe southern California wasn't the best place for the condor to make its last stand.

But the biggest contributor to their decline was probably the same as the biggest challenge to their recovery today, which is lead poisoning. California condors are carrion feeders; they eat large dead mammals and portions thereof. Unfortunately, during deer hunting season, some of the carcasses and gut piles they find are likely to have lead fragments in them. It turns out that when a hunter brings down a deer with a lead bullet, tiny fragments of lead are almost always left behind in the carcass or gut pile. Condors wind up ingesting some of those bits of lead along with their carrion. The result is that most of the condors in Arizona have been treated at least once for high lead levels, and a number of them have become ill or even died of lead poisoning.

So we're strongly encouraging hunters, especially in condor country, to switch to alternative forms of ammunition, like copper rifle bullets. It's better for wildlife in general and for condors in particular, and it's probably also safer for people who eat wild game. For more information on lead vs. copper bullets, check out the video on that topic on the park's web site. You'll find it and all the condor information under Nature and Science, Animals, and then Birds.

Fortunately, the captive breeding program was begun in 1983 and has been very successful at raising the number of California condors. Most of the condors in the Arizona/Utah area came out of that captive breeding program, where they come from all four of the different captive breeding locations. There are also a number of young condors in Arizona now who were bred here in the wild in Arizona, in nest caves either in the Grand Canyon or a little bit further north.

The program has been very successful, to the point that the world total today is over 300, and over half of today's condors are back in the wild. There are over 70 condors in the Arizona/Utah area.

The number of condors in the park changes all the time; it depends on the season, the weather, and especially on where the birds have been finding food lately. These birds are flying *long* distances every day, so they're constantly going in and out of Grand Canyon National Park.

Pat

Here at the Grand Canyon you have a unique opportunity to see the California condors because the Grand Canyon offers several things that they need. There are safe, inaccessible nest caves in the Redwall limestone. There are thermals to ride. There is a big open sky here which gives them plenty of room to fly around. And there's also plenty of food, in the form of large mammals.

The Grand Canyon Village itself offers north-facing cliffs for safe and pleasant roosting sites in warm weather, and also a concentration of food, thanks to the natural and unnatural water sources; watered hotel lawns to graze on; and the Bright Angel Trail as a natural route in and out of the Canyon. So the food that is available here—they like the big to medium-sized animals, like the mule deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.

Marker

The best season for seeing condors at Grand Canyon National Park is late spring into summer. I'd say mid-April through July you can pretty well count on seeing California condors if you spend a full day in the park and are on the lookout for them. They're seen *most* days in the park March through October.

By day California condors are on the lookout for food, so keep an eye out for them above or below the Rim from anywhere along the North or South Rim.

One of the best places and times to see them on the South Rim would be Grand Canyon Village, late in the afternoon or early in the morning. Condors tend to come in and roost overnight right below Grand Canyon Village, right below the Bright Angel Lodge and Lookout Studio, on the rocky outcrops and in the Douglas-fir trees there below the Rim. They generally come in to look for an overnight perch late afternoon, so look for them towards sunset and again first thing in the morning, in case they're still in the area.

Pat

How do you know you've seen a California condor? Well what you need to look for is first of all, there is *no* difference between the males and females; they are *identical*. In fact the re-introduction team, the only way *they* can tell, is by a blood test.

There *is* a difference, however, between juveniles and adults. The juveniles have a black head. They have, on the under-wing side, on an adult you would see a bright white triangle but on a juvenile you would see it's more of a mottled black and white, so underneath they do tend to look like all black.

An adult, however, when they get to be about five to six years old, they have an orange-ish /pinkish head. And they're kind of like bald eagles; they'll *gradually* go from that black head to the orange-ish /pinkish head in that time frame. But the adults also have that big, bright white triangle on the leading edge of the wing on the underside, and they have black on the trailing edge of the wing.

Condors also fly very flat, very steady. And the number one way to know that you've seen a condor is they have numbered tags located on the wings! If you're lucky enough to see that number, you can come to any of our visitor centers and find out more about that particular bird.

But the one bird that gets confused the most often with the condor is the turkey vulture, 'cause they are in the same family. A turkey vulture does not fly with the wings flat. Turkey vultures fly a little bit in a "V" and they wobble. Keep in mind a tightrope walker and how they wobble. Turkey vultures do the same thing.

And then when you see a raven, a raven has a wedge-shaped tail. They're all black, and they're very acrobatic. But when you see a raven, think about *one wing* of a condor.

Marker

So, how can you play a role in protecting Grand Canyon's condors?

Number one, if you see one in the park perched, stay at least 150 feet, which would be 50 meters, away from that bird. If you see a bird perched closer than that to people, be sure and report it to park staff.

Never feed any wildlife in a national park. Any kind of wild animal can become habituated to people; they can become beggars, and condors are very good at learning from other birds such as ravens.

Also please don't throw coins at any of the scenic overlooks. People seem to do that as some sort of good luck charm at Grand Canyon, but it's a form of litter and two California condors in Arizona have died of zinc poisoning from ingesting coins.

Finally, if you're a hunter, please switch to non-lead ammunition, especially if you hunt in condor country, which would be in California, Arizona or Utah.

Pat

Have we piqued your interest? Do you want to learn more? Well there are several ways to do that.

First of all, while you're here in the park, you can attend a Condor Talk, which are offered daily on the North Rim from mid-May to mid-October, and roughly March through October at the Lookout Studio on the South Rim.

Pat

You can also check out the Peregrine Fund's web site at http://www.peregrinefund.org/field_notes.asp

And also, check out the Nature and Science section of Grand Canyon National Park web site at <http://www.nps.gov/grca/naturescience/california-condors.htm>

Marker

Thanks for you time, and good luck spotting some condors. This has been Park Ranger Marker Marshall...

Pat

and Ranger Pat Brown, for Grand Canyon National Park.