



The Peregrine Fund

Working with Birds to Conserve Nature



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FOUR CALIFORNIA CONDORS DEAD

Four California Condors released in Northern Arizona have recently died. Lead toxicity from the ingestion of lead has been confirmed to be the cause of three of the condors and is also suspected in another. Two other condors are being treated for lead toxicity. The remaining 16 have been captured or are being captured for further testing. They will be treated if necessary. Additional details can be found on The Peregrine Fund's home page (www.peregrinefund.org).

“Our first priority is to keep the remaining 16 condors alive. These birds have struggled, some of them for 3 ½ years now, to make it in the wild. Once they are healthy, we want them back out as soon as possible,” stated Shawn Farry of The Peregrine Fund. “The second priority is to identify the source of this acute lead poisoning and eliminate it. In contrast to chronic lead exposure, we believe these exposures are due to a concentrated ‘point’ source. While the loss of such a large number of older condors is a serious setback, we feel it is most likely an anomaly,” finished Farry.

The first incidence with lead occurred on March 3 when Condor 116 was found dead along the Colorado River within the Grand Canyon. As a result, all 24 condors in the wild in Arizona were trapped and tested in mid-April. At that time only condor 119 was found to have elevated lead levels. She was treated and subsequently re-released. Despite having a clean bill of health in April, Condors 165, 191 and 182 were found dead on June 12, 15, and 20, respectively. Condor 150's stationary signal was isolated in an inaccessible location on July 2. It is also feared dead, presumably from lead toxicity.

“The public/private partnership to recover condors has proven very successful and we hope this is only a temporary setback,” stated David L. Harlow, Field Supervisor to the Arizona Ecological Services of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Necropsies, radiographs, and blood tests are being used to confirm the lead toxicity. In one dead condor, 17 lead shotgun pellets were found in the digestive system. Biologists are currently trapping the remaining wild condors to test them for lead exposure. Thus far, 10 of the remaining 16 condors in Arizona have been trapped and tested. Eight have moderate to extreme lead toxicity levels with six lead pellets surgically removed from one bird. Currently, four condors are being chelated to lower their blood lead levels.

Since the Condor Project was initiated in December 1996, 14 of the 35 condors released have died. Until the recent deaths, mortalities have been largely restricted to young, inexperienced birds. The loss of these older, experienced, self-sufficient birds is a more significant and unfortunate loss. While lead toxicity is considered a contributing factor in the condors' decline, and has continued to be seen in California, these deaths mark the first confirmed lead toxicity in Arizona.

The specific source or site of the lead has not been found and the public is being asked to assist in this effort. The most likely scenario is that the birds consumed a carcass, or carcasses, contaminated with lead shot. The area most recently frequented by the condors is the South Rim of the Grand Canyon with most "foraging flights" west of Grand Canyon Village. The condors are tracked constantly via radio-telemetry, however, rugged terrain, and common flights of 30-50 miles have made it impossible to track the birds to the lead source.

"We hope the source of contaminate can be isolated and future occurrences prevented," Pat O'Brien, Arizona Game and Fish Department spokesman stated.

"The loss of four otherwise healthy condors to lead poisoning is tragic, and the source of the lead needs to be found. This is a difficult task and we need the public's help," stated Roger Taylor of the BLM Arizona Strip Office.

The California Condors in Arizona are being released as a "non-essential/experimental population" under section 10j of the Endangered Species Act. Section 10j provides that the species can be released in an area without impacting current or future activities. This authority has been spelled out further in an "implementation agreement" between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and local governments. The agreement has contributed to a positive working relationship between the Federal government, various local governments, and industries.

The Arizona condor release is a joint project between The Peregrine Fund, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Arizona Game and Fish Department, CORE, and numerous other partners. The Peregrine Fund, a non-profit conservation organization headquartered in Boise, Idaho, is funding and conducting the release; BLM is managing the habitat for the release sites; USFWS is responsible for the overall recovery of the species; and the Arizona Game and Fish is responsible for all wildlife in Arizona. Regular updates are being provided by biologists on The Peregrine Fund's home page (<http://www.peregrinefund.org>).

As of July 1, 2000 there were 171 California Condors in the world – 48 in the wild in California and Arizona and 123 in captive breeding facilities (World Center for Birds of Prey, Zoological Society of San Diego, and Los Angeles Zoo).

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A detailed, two-page summary of lead-affected condors in Arizona is available upon request. Condor photo support is available at www.peregrinefund.org or <http://arizonaes.fws.gov/>

