

The Return of the California Condor

A New Day... Un Nuevo Dia

“The fact that the President, George Bush’s first foreign visit has our country as its destination is a clear message of the interest his administration places on strengthening links with Mexico.”

President Vicente Fox, Mexico

“We are welcoming a new day in the relationship between America and Mexico. Each nation has a new President, and a new perspective. Geography has made us neighbors; cooperation and respect will make us partners.”

President George W. Bush, U.S.

The United States and Mexico share a 2,235-mile border and a long yet little known history of wildlife conservation. As early as 1936, wildlife managers from both countries have reached across the way to each other and have been quietly conserving the wildlife and wild places of the border region.

What: First release of California condors in Mexico

Where: Sierra de San Pedro Martir, Baja, Mexico

When: Spring 2002

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“As an associate solicitor at the Interior Department a decade and a half ago, I played a part in the battle to take the last California condors out of the wild and save them from extinction. Back then, some of those critical of the approach said the condor must ‘die with dignity,’ but today I have the great pleasure of helping release condors

born and raised in captivity into the wild. Hand in hand with many partners, we’re pulling this majestic bird back from the brink of extinction.”—
Interior Secretary Gale Norton, April 5, 2001

The Story

Last April, Interior Secretary Gale Norton helped release five endangered California condors, North America’s largest bird, into the mountains along California’s Big Sur coast. Across the border in Mexico, Exequiel Ezcurra, head of the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia, hopes to see a similar event take place in his country, where California condors haven’t been seen since 1940. Presently, U.S. and Mexican conservationists are working together



Walter A. Weber



to evaluate the Sierra de San Pedro Martir in northern Baja as a suitable release site. If all goes as expected, Mexico might be home to four California condor chicks by spring 2002.

Status and Threats

The California condor is North America's largest bird, weighing up to 25 pounds and having a wingspan of 9.5 feet. The species has existed for at least 11,000 years, but since 1890, it has experienced severe declines due to a variety of factors, including egg collecting, lead poisoning (resulting from the ingestion of bullet fragments in the carcasses of game animals), and collisions with human-made structures (such as power lines). In 1982, the species hit a low point, with only 22 birds known to exist. Alarmed, conservationists initiated a captive breeding program, which has proven extraordinarily successful. Today there are about 160 California condors existing in the world, 54 of which are back in the wild.

Milestones on the Road to Recovery

1890

Wild California condor population estimated at 600.

1940

Wild population estimate drops to 100. Species disappears in Mexico.

1960

No more than 60 California condors estimated to exist in the world.

1967

California condor listed as an endangered species under the precursor to today's Endangered Species Act.

1975

To address the species' decline, the California Condor Recovery Program is established, led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Audubon Society, and also including the U.S. Forest Service, the San Diego and Los Angeles zoos, and the California Department of Fish and Game.

1982

Only 22 California condors known to exist. Conservationists begin to take condor chicks from the wild for captive rearing.

1983

Conservationists begin to remove eggs from the wild and hatch them in captivity. Chicks born in captivity are raised in boxes that simulate a cave environment and are fed by conservationists using condor hand puppets.

1985

Six wild condors disappear, leaving a single breeding pair in existence in the wild for the entire species. At this desperate point, the Fish and Wildlife Service makes the controversial decision to capture all remaining wild condors in an effort to keep them safe

and begin a captive breeding program—a last ditch effort to save the species from extinction.

1987

The last wild condor is removed from the wild. At this point, the entire species population numbers 27 individuals.

1988

For the first time, a chick is hatched from a condor egg laid in captivity. Meanwhile, to prepare for the species' eventual return to the wild, 13 female Andean condors—a closely related condor species—are released in California condor habitat. These Andean condors served as surrogates for their cousins, helping scientists perfect release techniques and identify condor threats.

1992

The California condor returns to the wild, with eight of 63 condors released in California.

1996

The California condor returns to Arizona, with 6 birds released at the Vermilion Cliffs.

2001

In March, for the very first time, a reintroduced California condor lays an egg in the wild. In April, Interior Secretary Gale Norton helps release five more California condors, increasing the wild population to 54 birds. All told, there are approximately 160 California condors in existence today. During the winter, four more condors will be released into the wild in Arizona. Additionally, a non-toxic bullet, which substitutes tungsten and tin for lead, is expected to hit the market this year.

2002

The California condor returns to Mexico?

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>

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