



Condors' Comeback A Gift To California's Central Coast

Condors can be distinguished from turkey vultures by the patch of white feathers on the wings. Gavin Emmons U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

My father was on the faculty of the Biology Department at Cal Poly for 40 years. His students got used to me tagging along on field trips and research projects. Sometimes I was allowed to go places where only biologists had access.

One such special trip was in the fall of 1982, when my dad took me to the Sespe Condor Sanctuary in northern Ventura County. There, we saw some of the last remaining California condors in the wild. At that time, only 23 condors existed, and the species appeared headed for extinction. Shortly after that trip, all wild condors were captured and placed in captive breeding programs in what many considered a futile attempt to save the species.

More than 30 years later, condors are flying wild once again. There are now more than 400 condors, spread out across California, Arizona, Nevada and Utah.

The condor is the largest native bird in North America. Fossil records of condors go back more than 10,000 years, and they had an important role in Native American lore. Condors are not the most attractive birds, but their great size, ancient history and remarkable story of recovery does warrant a certain kind of awe.

We are accustomed to seeing the condor's smaller cousin, the turkey vulture, scavenging along the highway and spiraling up thermal air currents in the sky. Imagine seeing a condor, with its 10-foot wingspan, doing that! Not only could it happen, it is increasingly likely. Last fall, seven condors were released in the hills behind San Simeon.

Ironically, the largest bird is often compared to one of the smallest. Condors have a role as the proverbial "canary in the coal mine." Their near-extinction is attributed to many different types of toxins — DDT, lead and other heavy metals, antifreeze, and small bits of plastic debris, which adults feed to their chicks.

In a gesture that speaks to the importance of respecting wild animals, three weeks ago a condor captured in 1985 was released back into his native territory in Tulare County. While in the captive breeding program, the male sired more than 30 chicks, making a major contribution to the survival of his species. After spending nearly half his expected life span of 60 years in captivity, the condor known as AC-4 flies over his home turf once again.

On the day in 1982 when we went to look at the condors, my dad said, "I'll never see condors fly wild again in my lifetime." And he never did. I never thought I would either. Now, every time I see a vulture soaring above me, I look to see whether it has the characteristic white patches on the wings or whether I can see a tag with a number on it.

We are fortunate to live in an area that is still wild enough to provide habitat for a bird that can fly more than 100 miles in a single day. Like the condor itself, the people who contributed to saving the species have a great vision for the future.

Michele Roest is a biologist. Her column appears monthly and is special to The Cambrian.

