

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FEATURE

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## THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR-- AMERICA'S LARGEST SOARING BIRD

More than a million years ago, ancestors of the California condor shared North America with mastodons and saber-toothed tigers. To pre-historic man this giant bird was sacred, and Indians later immortalized it as their "thunderbird." Lewis and Clark observed condors in their exploration of the Northwest Territory; during the California Gold Rush, miners used the "giant glider's" quills to transport gold dust.

Despite its long history, the California condor (Gymnogyps californianus) is far from immortal. Latest estimates are that 40-60 condors remain in existence, a statistic that places the species among the rarest birds in the world. The U.S. Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service recognized the bird's plight and included it on the Service's endangered species list in 1966.

Habitat modification, illegal shooting, and secondary poisoning are the main reasons for this drastic population decrease. Several aspects of condor behavior also contribute to increased mortality. The bird's large size, low soaring flight, and ungainly take-off after a heavy feeding make it particularly vulnerable to indiscriminate hunters.

Its reproductive rate is precariously low. Once mating occurs at the age of 5 or 6, a pair raises one youngster every other year. Despite contrary reports, condors appear sensitive to disturbance, abandoning their nests if man, their most dangerous enemy, encroaches too much upon their rugged, isolated environment.

Fossil evidence indicates that this giant member of the vulture family once ranged over the Western States from Canada to Mexico and across the entire southern portion of the United States. Today, only a remnant of the former condor population exists, inhabiting a few sites in California's southern coast ranges.

In recent years, measures have been taken to preserve this relic of the past and to erase man's ignorance about it. Los Padres National Forest contains two sanctuaries set aside to protect major nesting and roosting areas. Shooting of the avian giants is prohibited by California State law. The Fish and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with other conservation organizations, conducts an annual condor census. In an effort to increase knowledge of the bird's ecology, the Service employs a full-time condor biologist. The Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center also hopes to learn more about the California variety by studying the closely related Andean condor.

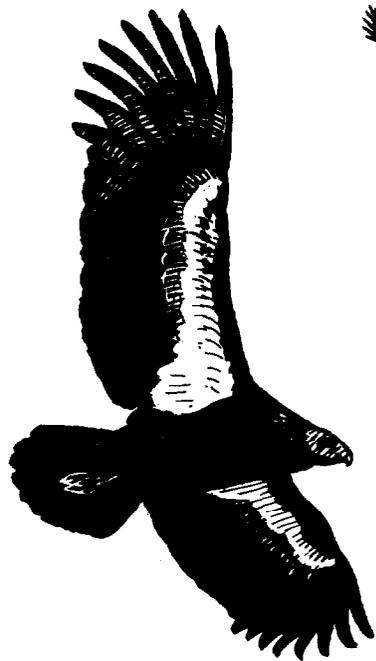
Western pioneers often regarded condors with superstitious fear, accusing them of carrying disease and attacking domestic livestock. No factual basis exists for the belief that California condors attack or carry off live animals or humans. Like other vultures, they feed solely on carrion, providing a valuable "clean-up" service. Food is plentiful year-round, and deer, cattle and sheep are favorite menu items.

The condor is North America's largest soaring land bird. On the average, an adult weighs 20-25 pounds and has a wingspread of 9 feet or more. Adults are characterized by dark brown plumage with a large white patch under each wing and a bare orange head. Youngsters go through several plumage stages, lack the wing patches, and have dark heads. In physical appearance, males and females generally are indistinguishable.

Although the condor is not attractive when stationary, it epitomizes majestic grace in full flight. Because it is structurally specialized for long range soaring, it can, given favorable air currents, cover miles without a wing-flap, often at speeds up to 40 miles per hour.

Ugly on the ground, beautiful aloft, hanging on the cliff of survival, these huge birds have won a big human audience. When an August 1972 forest fire in California drew near the sanctuary, newspapers over the Nation reported first on the potential condor threat and secondly on the burn. Actually, flames got no closer than within 10 miles of the nearest nest.

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