

THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR - A MODERN ROC

The Arabian Nights Come True in California

The California Condor is the largest of the Vulture family. In fact, it is probably the largest flying bird in the world. The Condor is heavily built, weighs about 20 pounds, is about four feet long, with a wing spread of 10 to 12 feet. Its bare neck is like a turkey. The huge bird flies gracefully and soars for hours almost without flapping its wings. The Condor is a scavenger, eating only carrion.

The only bird resembling the Condor is the buzzard. But the Condor, when standing, may at once be distinguished by the white border of the greater wing coverts and neck muffler; and when in flight by the white spot under wing coverts.

I have seen several Condors in the park, and have been much interested in their methods of taking flight from the ground. The big birds cannot apparently rise directly from the ground, but run along with wings outspread, catching the air gradually, bumping along and helping with their feet for all the world like a low-powered aeroplane taking flight.

On September 15, 1899, I saw two Condors near Castle Rocks, elevation 6,800 feet. The birds were feeding on a dead horse, and I got within 50 yards of them before they flew. They glided off from the top of the carcass. On November 10, 1905, I saw one Condor with five buzzards feeding on dead elk at Salt Springs, elevation 1,600 feet. Ranger C. W. Blossom and I, under cover of bushes, approached within 100 feet of these birds and watched them for almost an hour in their malodorous repast. When we stepped from under cover, the buzzards were first to fly, but the Condor ran on the ground with wings partly spread for a distance of fifty feet before taking wing. On September 30, 1907, I found one large Condor feeding on a dead sheep near Twin Peaks, elevation 10,550 feet. I rode on horse-back to within 40 yards of this bird before it flew; and it ran about 20 feet to the edge of a cliff, then pitched off down the canyon. On September 27, 1919, I saw one Condor and two ravens feeding on a dead cow at Wet Meadows, elevation 9,200 feet. I approached within 100 feet on horseback in plain sight and watched them for a few moments before they took flight. The ravens were first to go, and the Condor remained for some time after. When taking flight the Condor ran across the meadow about 60 feet at a rapid pace, and with wings partly unfolded, before leaving the ground.

Aside from my own observations, park rangers and tourists have reported seeing Condors within the park on a few occasions. In June, 1918 Park Ranger L. L. Davis saw a Condor at Sand Meadows, elevation 8,500 feet. This bird circled around Mr. Davis' camp within 100 feet of him several times before leaving, but did not light. On Jan. 6, 1924, Chief Ranger Guy Hopping saw a Condor feeding on the carcass of a burro at foot of Ash Mountain, elevation 1,700 feet. When Mr. Hopping approached the Condor ran towards a saddle some 75 yards away with wings partly unfolded and jumped along the ground as in an effort to leave the earth. On a few occasions the bird stopped and partly folded up its wings as if to give up the flight, but with renewed effort finally reached the saddle for its take-off. On December 13, 1925, one large Condor was observed at Camp Potwisha, elevation 2,000 feet. Park visitors spent some time watching the bird circling in flight over the tops of the crags nearby. There was not a chance of mistaking the bird, as apart from its size, the white spots under the wings were plainly visible.

While the California Condor has not been found nesting in the Sequoia National Park, this giant of the air and king of birds has been a casual visitor to the Park ever since the first arrival of white settlers in 1856. Early day settlers proclaim that the birds were frequently seen, but the Condors have come less and less frequently, so that for several years past it has been feared that each occurrence would give the last sight of this fast vanishing species of bird life. The inroads of settlement, persistent shooting, robbing nests of eggs, poison baits set out for coyotes, and the fact that the birds are not prolific breeders, reduced them so rapidly that the species was practically wiped out before people realized what was happening, and before laws could be enacted to save them.

Man - the Condor's Worst Enemy

Before the arrival of white men in California, the Condor had little to fear. But when man appeared upon the scene to upset all the workings of nature with his death dealing methods, this useful and picturesque species rapidly diminished and may soon be extinct.

The first death trap for the condor was man with firearms. It was a great event to kill one of these giant navigators of the air, for they were bold and came within easy rifle range. Man's next destructive effort was to obtain eggs of the wonderful bird to accompany his specimen. Then came the custom of the sheep men, of putting out poison baits in the carcasses of sheep. No doubt thousands of Condors met their deaths through eating poison. For many years there were no restrictions placed on the methods of poisoning, or what kinds of poison could be used. It seemed every man's privilege to use the most deadly poison for the purpose that he could obtain. As an illustration of this; while I was stopping at Huron, Fresno County, California, during January, 1890, Mr. Manuel Cadoza, a sheep herder, brought in two beautiful dead Condors. These birds had died from eating poison. Coyotes had killed two of his sheep and he had poisoned the carcasses with the hope of killing the coyotes; but instead of getting the animals he got the two big birds that had been feeding on the dead sheep. Cadoza said that he noticed several of the Condors around the poisoned sheep the day before, and upon going out in the evening found the dead ones a few yards from the bait.

Those were the first Condors that I had seen, and such was their size and curious appearance they seemed to me rather the birds of some fabulous tale than ones that lived in these modern days.

The California Condor is now making its last flight for life. Unless some action is taken to save the modern roc it will join the dodo and the great auk as a legend instead of a living example of the Creator's handiwork. This monstrous bird is the product of nature working through the ages for thousands of millions of years. The destruction of the species thus deprives the earth of a wonderful organism which no human power can ever again restore. Even under the present laws for their protection I can see no chance for a survival of the Condor. Poison will do its work. They are now on the very verge of extermination. It is doubtful if there are 100 individual birds living today. Every friend of birds and of the picturesque in nature should come to the rescue of the Condor before it is too late.

On November 27, 1925, there was unveiled at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, a large mural painting of prehistoric animals, birds and other creatures of California. The paintings were based on skeletons dug from the La Brea asphalt pits near Los Angeles. Among the picturesque are those of giant Vultures with a wing spread of 20 feet, saber-toothed tigers, giant ground sloths, huge wolves, imperial elephants with huge curved tusks, wild horses, camels and California lions twice the size of the present day African lion. In the process of evolution this terrible, if interesting, fauna doubtless had to give way or man might not be here today. But in the Condor we have perhaps the last great bird of the Pleistocene age, just as the giant sequoias are the surviving specimens of a mammoth vegetation of a past geological period. The California Condor is not only harmless - it is useful and highly picturesque. Let's save this modern roc, every sight of which conjures up the tale of Sinbad the Sailor in the Arabian Nights.

Efforts to Save the Condor

Only quick action will save the Condor. The following are suggestions:

1. Laws to make it a felony to kill a Condor or take eggs for a period of 20 years.
2. Laws making it a misdemeanor for any person to put out poisoned bait of any kind, except that which has been certified for use by the proper authorities.
3. Signs posted at conspicuous places throughout the state by Audubon societies and other interested organizations, carrying a colored picture of the bird, with printed copies of the laws for its protection.
4. When Condors are seen in any part of the state the observer should be requested to immediately notify the California Fish & Game Commissioners of the birds' presence, giving date seen, locality, and number of birds seen.