

A bit about California Condors

Conservation Legends



California Condor Quick Facts

- New World vultures with a 9.5 foot wingspan!
- Largest land bird in North America!
- Lifespan of over 60 years!
- Scavengers able to eat 3 pounds of meat in one sitting
- Great eyesight, poor sense of smell
- Feed their chicks calcium-rich bone
- Symbol of U.S. conservation
- Main threat is lead poisoning, but also microtrash and DDT



From 22 to over 500!

Condors have thrived in North America for millions of years. But, within the recent centuries, condors have become extremely threatened by human activities. By the 1980s, only 22 individuals remained. It was then that conservationists knew that if they didn't step in, the condor would likely go extinct. All were brought into captivity to breed in 3 zoos, including the L.A. Zoo by 1987. There has been much progress since, but condors are still a critically endangered species. Lead poisoning is the main cause of condor deaths.



Condor 20, hatched in 1980
One of the original 22 condors



Lead bullet fragments in a condor
Photo ©National Park Service

Lead: Condor Killer

The leading cause of California Condor deaths is the use of lead ammunition in hunting. Lead bullets blast into hundreds of small pieces upon impact with the hunted animal. Condors end up ingesting the lead as they eat the carcass.

All condors test positive for lead and many end up needing to be brought into captivity so that the lead can be purged from their system. Biologists will look for clinical symptoms in the bird to determine if they have been exposed to high levels of lead, as well as analyzing the isotopic signature of feathers.

While the use of lead ammunition is illegal in California now, many hunters still choose to use it. So long as there is lead in the environment, condors can still get lead poisoning.



Condor 732, hatched in 2014

What do those numbers mean?

Ever since the first condors were brought into captivity, biologists have placed tags with unique numbers on their wings. Wild birds also have a VHF transmitter sewn into their tag, which allow biologists to track movements of individual condors.

The numbers represent when the condor hatched in sequential order. Every bird, alive or deceased, has a number. The numbers don't represent the total condors alive today.

The tag is composed of a two digit number plus another number indicated by the color of the tag (100s-900s).

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