



BRINGING BACK CONDORS

BY MATT DESEMBERG

Members of one Indigenous tribe are bringing these rare birds back home to northern California.

EARLY ONE MORNING

in May 2022, a young California condor was beginning what would be a very interesting day. He crept toward the open door of an outdoor aviary, a large cage for birds. With a flap of his wings, he leaped into the air and flew off. Moments later, a second condor followed him out.

Nearby, Tiana Williams-Claussen was watching proudly. Tiana is a wildlife biologist and member of the Yurok Tribe. “I felt giddy, like a kid on Christmas morning,” says Tiana. “Watching them fly free was one of those moments that’s going to be with me forever.”

Condors disappeared from the tribe’s coastal northern California homeland 120 years ago. Then, in the 1980s, scientists started breeding condors in captivity and releasing the young into the wild. Now Tiana and others are working hard to make sure the birds are here to stay.



▲ Tiana Williams-Claussen holds a condor close while taking part in a training on how to care for the birds. Above, two condors sun themselves inside their outdoor aviary.

The California condor vanished from northern California’s coastal redwood forests more than a century ago.



- historical range
- current range



▲ Tiana and her team released this young condor into the wild. Soon after, he stopped to rest in a tall redwood tree.

◀ Some scientists think condors' bald heads help them clean up more easily after eating. Others think the bare skin helps them stay cool.

BIG, BEAKY BIRDS

California condors are the largest birds in North America. They measure more than nine feet from wingtip to wingtip. They are also incredible flyers, soaring up to 15,000 feet above the ground. That's half as high as a jet plane flies!

These big birds are *scavengers*, which means they feed only on already-dead animals. And they are built for doing just that.

“Condor beaks are especially strong,” Tiana explains. “This allows them to pierce

the tough skin of creatures such as sea lions, which other scavengers can't do.” After condors start the work, other scavengers such as crows and insects can dig in, too.

DISAPPEARING ACT

California condors used to be found all over the western part of North America (see map on page 14). But by the 1800s, settlers began moving west from the eastern United States. Once they arrived and started building houses and farms, condors had fewer

places left to nest in peace. Later, many of the birds were accidentally poisoned by pesticides used by farmers. Others became sick and died from *lead poisoning*. Lead is a metal found in some bullets. When condors ate the remains of animals hunted with lead bullets, they often gobbled up some bits of the

dangerous metal. By 1900, the California condor had vanished from the skies above Yurok lands. And by the 1980s, only 22 of the birds were left in the wild. Scientists decided to try one last way to save the remaining condors: They trapped all of them so they could try to breed them in captivity.

▼ California condors like to rest and nest on cliffs and other high-up places.



GIVING CONDORS A CHANCE



Here's what scientists do to give condor chicks the best chance to grow up and survive in the wild.

- When a condor mom lays an egg, scientists remove it from the nest. This often makes Mom lay again—a second chance for a healthy chick. Meanwhile, scientists protect the first egg and track the chick's growth. A special light machine (above) lets them see inside.
- Biologists use puppets that look like adult condors to feed and train the young birds (below). This keeps the chicks from getting too comfortable around people.
- Before setting a condor free, scientists fit it with a GPS tracker. This helps them follow the bird over time and make sure it stays healthy. They also add an ID tag so they can tell who's who from a distance.



California condors like to hang out together. If you're lucky enough to spot one, there's a good chance that another one is nearby!

GO, PREY-GO-NEESH!

Over time, scientists raised hundreds of condor chicks in captivity (see “Giving Condors a Chance” at left). The chicks grew big and strong and learned to survive on their own. So the scientists released them in a few wild places where they once lived, including the Grand Canyon.

Tiana joined the Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department in 2007. Her goal was to bring condors back to her homeland. The Yurok call the birds *Prey-go-neesh*. In their stories

and ceremonies, condors are kind-hearted spirits and their feathers are sacred.

In 2021, the Yurok received four young condors and one adult. The adult acted as a mentor to the younger birds, showing them how grown-up condors behave. This “education” gives the young condors a much better chance of surviving in the wild.

THE BIG DAY

On the day the condors were set free, Tiana expected

them to stay close to “home.” But they flew right off into the wild!

The two birds, given the Yurok names *Poy'-we-son* and *Nes-kwe-chokw*, were the first condors to return to Yurok skies. Two more soon joined them. With enough time and care, those skies may once again have many condors, flying free. 🦅



▲ This is just one of the more than 300 condors living in the wild today. Every condor has an ID tag on its wing that helps scientists keep track of it.