

KNOWLEDGE BASE

A Survival Story, Well Worth Telling



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For my generation of wildlife biologists, the California condor stands apart as an icon for endangered species management. In this issue of *Fair Chase*, Kathy Sullivan relates

the current chapter in the condor story—a drama in which both scientists and hunters play essential roles. Her article brings to mind the condor’s close brush with extinction. The story encourages thoughtful reflection about endangered species management, and is thus a story well worth telling.

The California condor is a large, black vulture with an average wingspan of more than nine feet. Its mostly bald head, an adaptation for dining on rotting meat, can range in color from yellow to pink depending on the bird’s mood. During the Ice Age that ended about 11,000 years ago, the California condor ranged throughout North America scavenging the carcasses of mastodons, giant sloths, camels, saber-toothed cats, and other now-extinct mammals. By the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the condor’s range was confined to the American southwest and the west coast. Populations declined rapidly in the early 1900s from a variety of threats including predator poisoning, egg collecting, and museum collecting. In addition, ranchers mistakenly thought that condors killed livestock and shot many on sight.

Wild condors can live up to 60 years and they mate for life. Pairs produce only a single egg every other year, however, and this greatly constrains population growth. Despite being placed on the federal endangered species list in 1967, condors were down to a mere 22 birds by 1982. Disaster hit that year when six wild condors disappeared, including four members of the last five known breeding pairs. With extinction imminent, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made the extremely

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controversial decision to bring all remaining condors into captivity. Biologists then began the difficult task of learning how to breed the birds in captivity, and the first chicks were produced in 1988. I recall that one of the first chicks died while being handled, and how much empathy I felt for the biologist. Literally, he was holding the fate of the species in his hands, and the weight of that responsibility must have been awesome.

The gamble was a success, and efforts to introduce condors back into the wild began in 1992. The recovery goal is to maintain at least two wild populations in addition to the captive population, with each wild population including at least 150 individuals and 15 breeding pairs. Each wild population is to be reproductively self-sustaining with a positive rate of increase. While the California condor remains one of the most endangered birds in the world, today condors roam free in areas within California, Baja California, northern Arizona, and southern Utah.

The condor program was the most expensive endangered species effort ever launched, costing millions of dollars. Was it worth it? Certainly, the wealth of science gained is part of the equation. But to truly answer the question, we would need to put a price on the continued existence of a magnificent animal that is part of North America’s historical, ecological, and cultural landscape. I can’t imagine how that price might reasonably be determined. I do know that the condor still exists in the wild. But without society’s willingness to “pull out all the stops,” the species surely would have been lost.

That the saga continues is, in itself, a testament to the dedication of countless scientists, resource managers, policy makers, and conservation-minded citizens. And as Kathy Sullivan’s article reveals, hunters have yet again stepped up to the wildlife conservation plate. ■

