

## **Ventana Wilderness Society Condor Reintroduction Program Big Sur, California**

California Condors, *Gymnogyps californianus*, are currently being reintroduced to the central coast by the [Ventana Wilderness Society](#), which is a non-profit, 501(c)3, organization. The Society is dedicated to the preservation of native plants and animals through research, education, and restoration. By the efforts of the Ventana Wilderness Society, Condors are now seen throughout the mountains, coastal canyons and valleys of Big Sur. You can help in these efforts by donating time or money. Please contact the Ventana Wilderness Society directly if you would like to help.

At the turn of the century, the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) population began to plummet after decades of wanton shooting and poisoning. While habitat loss is a factor and limits the total population, the habitat that remains is still intact to sustain a population of condors. In 1987, the last wild condor was taken into captivity to join 26 others. A successful captive breeding and reintroduction program turned the tide. In 1998, the total population reached 150 birds, and 35 of those were in the wild.

Given the success of bald eagle reintroduction, Ventana Wilderness Society was requested by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to join the California Condor Recovery Program in a ten-year first phase effort to bring the condor back from the brink of extinction. VWS is the first private non-profit in California to release condors. These majestic birds can be seen flying over the mountains and valleys of California's Central Coast. The goal of VWS is to restore condors to California.

### **Notes from the Field, July 2000**

The big news this month is that the orange-tagged condors found a sea lion carcass on a beach south of Big Sur. The carcass was located just north of a ravine that the orange-tags have been using as a source of fresh water for the past few months.

We are not sure exactly when the large sea mammal washed up, but Molly Church observed all the orange-tags perched on rocks overlooking it on the 9th. A coyote was seen on the carcass that first day, but it never came back after that. It took a few days for the condors to finally come down off the cliffs. After that, there was another delay of a couple days while the birds played on the beach. Like young children seeing the ocean for the first time, the orange-tags, joined by Y68 and Y90 now, seemed to delight in picking at kelp, walking near the waves, flushing Turkey Vultures and drinking from a spring they discovered.

After several days of play, the condors finally got down to business and started eating the sea lion carcass. The feeding was tentative throughout the following

days. This sea lion carcass, high in fat content, was the first sea mammal found by the orange tags, Y68 and Y90. Y94, who has fed on sea mammals before, also fed on this carcass.



Molly Church - tracking condors

There has always been concern regarding the occurrence of lead in wild carcasses. Recent poisonings in the Arizona condor population have further escalated this concern. Thus, a tissue sample was taken from the sea lion carcass by Joe Burnett & Jessica Steffan and analyzed by Dr. Mike Murray, our project veterinarian. No lead or other toxic substances were found.

The location of the sea lion has put the condors in relatively close proximity to coastal Highway 1. As a result, we have had several instances where passing motorists have seen and approached the birds, at times getting within 50 feet before field staff could intervene. One of the major obstacles in the recovery program is preventing the reintroduced condors from getting acclimated to the presence or approach of humans. If you do happen to spot the birds, please do not approach them. The best way to observe the condors, both for their and your safety, is from 100 feet or more and for short periods of time.

The blue-tags have continued to fly back and forth between Big Sur and southwest Kern County. USFWS biologists observed B70 and B71 feeding with 16 condors from southern population in Santa Barbara County. Condor B71 spent the latter half of the month in Big Sur, a big change from May and June, where she spent most of her time in southern California.

As of July 31, a fire is burning 15 miles south of the Big Sur condor release site in the southern Los Padres National Forest near Fort Hunter Liggett. The fire is 80% contained and moving in a southeasterly direction away from the release site. The expected control date for the fire is August 8, 2000. We don't expect this to be as threatening as the Sept/October '99 fire in which we had to evacuate 3 condors from the release site. See the [Sept/October '99 Condor Field Notes](#) for details of that evacuation.

## Notes from the Field, June 2000

The condors are taking advantage of the long, hot days of summer to explore central and southern California. Summer conditions increase thermal activity and provide the "fuel" for condor flight. Columns of rising hot air, called thermals, act as invisible elevators for the birds. The condors spent a majority of the daylight hours this month soaring from thermal to thermal.

The older, more experienced condors are still traveling the furthest distances and for longer periods than the younger ones. Condor B71 flew to southern California near Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge, approximately 150 miles, on June 5 and she remained in that area until June 24. B71 was observed feeding with 13 of the southern California condors on two carcasses from June 14-19. B71's absence from the central California region was the longest yet recorded for any of the Big Sur condors.

On June 10 and 11, while B71 was down south, nine southern California condors flew northeast of Big Sur to Chews Ridge near Tassajara Hot Springs. None of the Big Sur condors went to join them and the southern California condors returned south, missing the Big Sur release site on their way back. Almost all the mixing between the Big Sur group of 14 condors and the southern California group of 18 condors has occurred in the south, with exception of condor Y30's visit to the Big Sur site almost a year ago. We anticipate the arrival of southern California condors in Big Sur sooner than later.

The orange-tagged condors continue to expand their range in the Big Sur region. We observed the orange-tags soar as far north as Mt. Manuel. Movements to the south have been minimal, less than 2 miles from the release site. Condors Or99 and Or12 were observed soaring with turkey vultures on separate occasions. The turkey vultures could potentially lead these two condors to a natural food source.

Recently, the number of incidents of California condors landing on rooftops of private homes in Big Sur has dramatically increased almost immediately after their long-distance forays from southern California. The cause of this change in overall behavior is unknown. Regardless, human contact is potentially dangerous for the condors and should be avoided to keep this endangered species wild. In

addition, condors have been known to do considerable damage to manmade structures. If you observe condors perched on a manmade structure, please contact the Ventana Wilderness Society as soon as possible. We recommend spraying the birds gently with water from a garden hose to remove them from inappropriate areas, and request that there be no feeding of the condors.

Please contact us to report condor sightings. Please include the tag numbers and colors, location, date, time and behavior. Ventana Wilderness Society thanks you for your support.

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## Notes from the Field, May 2000

The Big Sur condors reached two milestones this month. The blue- and yellow-tagged condors traveled further than ever before and orange-tagged condors Or99 and Or4 found a wild carcass earlier than any condor previously released in Big Sur.

On May 12, 2000 VWS condor biologist Marylise Lefevre discovered Or99 and Or4 feeding on a small, stillborn deer in the upper portion of Slide Canyon near Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. They located the carcass approximately 600 feet upslope from the Slide Canyon creek site the orange tags frequently visit to drink and bathe. Or99 and Or4 consumed the deer carcass the same day, leaving only the hide and skeletal remains. The other orange-tags (Or8, Or9 and Or12) did not discover this carcass, but continue to feed on supplemental carcasses at the release site and visit the slide canyon creek site to drink and bathe. Condor B70 followed the young orange-tags to Slide Canyon and stayed with them briefly before flying north to the Big Sur Valley. This was the first time any of the older condors had followed the orange-tags to this site.

In early May B61, B64, and B71 flew 150 miles to southern California near Frazier Mountain. This was B64's first trip this far south and the second for B61 and B71. Later in May B67, Y68, Y92, and Y94 made the journey to the Frazier Mountain area and were later joined by B61, B64, B70 and B71. Six Big Sur condors (B64, B67, B71, Y68, Y92, and Y94) were observed by USFWS condor biologists feeding on a stillborn calf carcass at Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge with a group of the southern California condors. Y90 and the orange-tags are the only Big Sur condors that haven't flown to southern California.

On a return flight to Big Sur from southern California, condor B70 was observed briefly on Hearst Ranch by Hearst family and friends near Burnett Peak. Condors

are naturally curious animals. This curiosity is in part how they might discover a carcass. For example, we observed condors B64 and B71 investigate a group of turkey vultures gathered at a sea mammal carcass along the shoreline. B64 and B71 were rewarded with a meal after curiously taking a closer look. Without parents for guidance these young condors are left with the task of figuring out what forms of curiosity are appropriate when investigating different types of ground activities. B70's curious investigation of a small group of people located along a ridge top on Memorial Day weekend is a good example of the crossover that occurs between condors and humans in the natural world. B70 was investigating a group of folks gathered at a campsite on a very isolated ridge top that is rarely occupied by people. In this rare instance his curiosity went without reward and he left the area after only a few minutes of investigation. The folks gathered at this campsite responded appropriately to B70, they did not attempt to feed or approach the young condor and let him be on his way. They also contacted us at our field office immediately after the incident occurred.

Please contact us at (831) 624-1202 if you observe condors in the wild. Record the wing tag color and number of the condor and details of the incident (time, location, behavior of condor). We will respond to all sighting reports ASAP.

Condor Watching Hot Spots: Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park.

## **Notes from the Field, April 2000**

Condors B61 and B71, last seen in Big Sur on April Fool's Day (April 1, 2000), were located by USFWS biologists in southern California near Frazier Mountain on April 5, 2000. B61 and B71 were observed flying and perching with as many as 10 USFWS condors at a time. This 150 + mile flight (one-way!!) marks the longest journey to date by the Big Sur condors. B61 and B71 returned to Big Sur on April 8 to rejoin the other blue, yellow, and orange tagged birds.

On April 27 Ventana Wilderness Society biologists transferred Or200 to the USFWS release site in southern California. Or200 was recaptured in Big Sur shortly after release in early March due to behavioral problems. She was paired up with USFWS condor B1 to allow her more socialization time and both will be re-released in early May from the southern California site. She fed with condor B1 almost immediately after being placed in the release pen and only a couple of days later was observed nuzzling heads with her new penmate.

Condor Or4, Or9, Or12 & Or99 warming their backs before the last flight of the day took them into a stand of trees overlooking the ocean; that evening's roost.

Or4, seen flying in the photograph above, was the last condor to take flight from this jagged ridgeline.

All the above Condors were released by Ventana Wilderness Society in Big Sur March 4, 2000

*photo: Stan Russell*©Our newly released orange-tags (Or4, Or8, Or9, Or12, and Or99) continue to explore the local Big Sur landscape. On April 5 VWS condor biologist Mason Adams tracked the orange-tags to an isolated coastal canyon and discovered the young condors drinking and bathing in a small stream. This was the first time we have observed Big Sur condors at a natural water source. (Note: The USFWS have also observed the southern California population of condors at natural water sources on several occasions.) The young orange-tags are now making routine trips down to this watering hole. We have yet to see any of the older blue or yellow tagged condors follow them to this spot.

Condor AC-8, re-released last month in southern California, has been slowly reestablishing her old ways. Her movements are being monitored via a satellite transmitter attached to her wing. The satellite location data has revealed that she has revisited parts of her original foraging range. USFWS biologists have not observed the younger condors follow her to these locations, but anticipate it will happen within the next couple of months. AC-8 can be identified in the field by a blue tag with a white number 12.

The best bet for observing condors in Big Sur is at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. Good Luck and don't forget your binoculars!!

## **Notes from the Field, March 2000**

On March 4, six condors awaited their release from the David P. Usher Rearing and Release Facility under a thick blanket of coastal fog. At approximately 12 PM Marylise Leferve, VWS Condor Rearing Specialist, pulled the rope to open the outside door of the flight pen. Condor Or12 was the closest to the door and she began to peer into this new opening. She was then spooked off her position by Or4, leaving Or0 the next closest condor to the door. Or0 slowly approached the opening and stood at the brink of her first free-flight. Or0 took one last gaze back into the flight pen at the others and then spread her wings and leaped into the air. Her first flight carried her south around the front of the flight pen where she ended up landing on the release slope. One by one, the others approached the doorway and flew out. Or0 was followed by Or12, Or4, Or99, and Or8. Condor Or9 did not to leave until the following morning. Condor Or99 returned to the flight pen in the morning and Or9 followed him out.

The entire month of March provided the condors with excellent flying conditions. The young orange-tagged condors took advantage of the great weather to hone their amateur flight skills. In mid-March, only three weeks after his release, condor Or4 flew down to the Big Sur Valley following the lead of the older blue- and yellow-tagged birds. Or4 made an even bigger step by feeding with the older condors at a carcass site on the upper slopes of the valley the following day. Or4 had to wait until all the other

condors filled up their crops before he could begin feeding. We have observed a regimented hierarchy develop amongst the condors over the years. The older, stronger blue-tagged condors feed first followed by the yellow-tags (with exception to Y68 who is the same age as the blue-tags) who are then followed by the even younger orange-tagged condors. Individual dominance still varies within each age group.

Condors Or8, Or9, Or99, and Or12 have all made flights out the canyon, but not as far as Or4's foray. Or0 was captured shortly after release due to a behavioral problem and is currently being held and monitored inside the rearing and release facility. Flights for the blue and yellow tags were primarily from the release site to areas as far north as Pico Blanco Summit. We do anticipate larger movements from these condors as the spring weather sets in. We still recommend Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park as the best place to observe the condors on a daily basis. (Watch the ridge line east of the park.)

## Notes from the Field, February 2000

Storm after storm rolled into the central coast during the month of February, drenching the blue and yellow-tagged condors at their redwood roost sites. We measured 32.3 inches of rain at the release site over the course of the month, including over 7 inches of rain in one day. This substantial increase in moisture restricted condor movements to a small area that stretched from the release site along the Coast Ridge north to the Big Sur Valley near Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park.

The orange-tagged condors received their wing transmitters early in the month. These transmitters will allow the field crew to track and monitor the birds' progress after release, just as they do with the blue and yellow-tagged condors. In addition, we also extracted blood from each condor to check for any potential health problems. The process of tagging and applying the transmitters also serves as "human aversion" training for the young condors. The negative experience will reinforce their fear of humans, which isn't always intrinsic to them at first. Condor Y90 was released from the flight pen at the same time we trapped up the orange-tagged condors for transmitters. Y90 received some brief human aversion training before he was released. In the days following his release, Y90 reunited with his wild counterparts and spent the remainder of the month feeding and roosting with them.

After Y90's departure as mentor, the social structure among the orange-tags changed quite a bit. Or99 stepped up to replace Y90 as the dominant condor, mimicking the older birds' behavior along the way. Or99 could maintain that role for only so long before reverting to his playful and chick-like behavior with the others.

Condor Viewing Hotspot (roost site): [Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park](#) (Valley View Trail)

## Notes from the Field, January 2000

January finally brought winter to Big Sur and with it three storms which kept the condors roost-bound for days on end. When the weather cleared up most of the movement by the condors was between the release site and Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. The blue- and yellow-tagged birds continue to locate and feed on supplemental carcasses placed in the area around Pfeiffer State Park and have spent multiple nights roosting there.

The condors seemed less interested in feeding this month than they have been at other times of the year. Some of the birds voluntarily went long stretches without eating at all. Condor B70 waited 13 days before finally feeding again. A pair of Golden Eagles continue to visit feeding areas near the release site. The orange-tagged condors attentively watch the aerial acrobats and ground combat between the eagles and the blue- and yellow tagged condors from the safe confines of the flight pen of the rearing and release facility. This kind of visual mentoring by wild condors will be very beneficial to the young, inexperienced orange-tags after their release into the wild.

We also observed a bobcat feeding on a carcass near the release site this month. The bobcat would visit the carcass multiple times throughout the day. Sometimes the bobcat would not feed, but instead just sit by the carcass as if guarding it from the condors, who flew low over the bobcat's head at times. On one occasion we observed the bobcat pulling grass over the carcass to cover it up. Bobcats are known to cache their food, but this cache didn't stand much of a chance. The cat was out of the bag and the condors were well aware of its presence underneath the grass. Although aware of the hidden carcass, the condors remained cautious and would not approach if the bobcat was in the area. A combination of the bobcat, golden eagles and winter weather have made feeding much more challenging for the birds this month. None-the-less, the wild condors continue to hurdle nature's obstacles, gaining valuable experience and growing stronger with each new day.

The orange-tagged condors continue to broaden their socialization with one another. We have not observed the orange-tags feed as a group yet, but we have seen them at least feed with one or two other birds. Condor Or0, the smallest of the group at 16 lbs., has been observed feeding with current mentor Y90 on many occasions, but rarely with the others. Condor Or0 has shown a keen interest in other wild mentors as well. She was observed nibbling beaks through the flight pen fence with condors B61, Y92, and Y94. Although the orange-tags have some minor social kinks that still need to be worked out, we anticipate that they will be feeding as a group by the scheduled release time on February 26, 2000.

Condor viewing spots: Valley View Trail in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, and Highway 1 (pull-outs just south of Grimes Point).



## Notes from the Field, December 1999

December, here in Big Sur, started out relatively cold, at times dipping into the thirties Fahrenheit. As the month progressed, however, it heated up and the lack of rain made a pleasant environment for the new chicks. All the chicks are progressing very well. A dominance hierarchy has emerged amongst the chicks (not including mentor, Y90). Chicks #99 and #9 are vying for the most dominant spot and #4 is close behind. Chick #0 is the smallest of the group, weighing 15.5 lbs. She has yet to warm up to the other chicks, but continues to nibble beaks with the wild condors through the fence of the flight pen. All the chicks have discovered a love for bathing. Each one visits the condor pool one or more times a day for a bath. At times it is possible to observe up to three chicks in the bath at one time.

Condor Y90 is still in the flight pen acting as mentor to the chicks. He has proved himself very valuable in this role. He is not overly aggressive, and will at times even allopreen with the chicks, but if any chick oversteps its boundaries with him he is quick to show his dominance. This is very important, as it will lessen the shock to the chicks once they are released into the competitive free-flying population. Condor B67 had already displayed much positive influence on the chicks. He, as an older bird, seemed less enthusiastic than Y90 in the mentor role, and so was released on 2 Dec 99 from his duties and returned to the free-flying population.

The free-flying population had a rocky start this month. After the condors were feeding well in the first week of December, a road-killed feral pig carcass was introduced on a slope near the release site. Condors Y94 and B67 both fed on the pig, and B67 even successfully defended the carcass from scavenging golden eagles. The rest of the condors, however, would not even approach the carcass. Eventually additional food sources were supplied as alternatives to the pig, but the birds would not approach them either. Finally, after almost twenty days without feeding, the birds fed on a calf carcass. Since that time, all of them seem to have voracious appetites, and they waste little time approaching fresh carcasses. The free-flying birds continue to feed around the release site and areas to the north. A good place to possibly spot a condor is at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park.

## Notes from the Field, November 1999

After AC-8's departure last month, VWS biologists attached a double door trap to the flight pen of the rearing and release facility. The main purpose of the trap is to allow wild condors to interact and mentor with this year's chicks. This will allow chicks a smoother transition from captivity into the wild population. VWS biologists can remotely operate the double doors from within the facility, allowing individually selected free-flying condors to be cycled in and out of the flight pen. So far, we have successfully allowed three wild birds (B67, B71, and Y90) into the flight pen via the double door system.

On November 16th, we transferred condor chicks #99, #00, #8 and #12 from the Los Angeles Zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park. The four chicks, ranging from six to seven months of age, were released into the flight pen with #4, #9, B67, and B71 shortly after their arrival. Initial interactions with mentors B67 and B71 and chicks #4 and #9 went smoothly. The cycling of mentor birds began with the release of B71 and the introduction of Y90 via the double door system. This cycling will be complete when all nine wild condors have engaged in brief mentoring periods with this year's chicks inside the flight pen.

Aside from the excitement of the new chicks and the new double door system, the free-flying birds have been having adventures of their own. B71 was observed feeding at Sea Lion Cove on a marine mammal carcass. Y94, following the lead of her turkey vulture companions, discovered two carcasses: a cattle carcass on a Big Sur ranch, and a marine mammal carcass at Sea Lion Cove. This "natural foraging" behavior is a good sign of maturity. The maturity of the young, free-flying birds has also been demonstrated by their recent improvement in defending carcasses from golden eagles.

VWS would like to thank Lygia Chappellet and her family for all their help last month during the fire. Lygia and her family provided temporary refuge for condors AC-8, #4, #9 and five VWS biologists on their ranch during the month-long fire evacuation. We would also like to thank those that sent contributions to the Condor Relief Fund, which was set up to help pay for unexpected expenses related to the fire.

## **Notes from the Field, October 1999**

This month the Big Sur forest fires were successfully contained and condor chicks #204 and 209 were returned to the release facility on October 11. Many thanks go out to the US Forest Service, the California Department of Fire, and the California State Parks for all their help during the fires. Our mentor bird, AC-8, was returned to the LA Zoo on October 5. She will be temporarily held at the zoo and then later released in Santa Barbara County. This will be a momentous occasion because AC-8 was one of the last condors captured from the original wild-born population and she will be the first of the wild-born population to be returned to the wild. She is also one of the oldest living condors. Many condor biologists are hopeful that this matriarch will pass on knowledge to the younger, captive bred birds currently in the wild.

At the end of this month, condor chicks #204 and 209 were released from their separate rearing pens into a common flight pen. This is the first step in the release process. At this time both condors are feeding well, although they have not become familiar with one another.

Also this month, three of the free-flying condors were sighted at Sea Lion Cove, a sea lion rookery where the condors found and fed on a sea lion carcass earlier this year. Condors #71, 92, and 94 were seen flying in the area. Turkey vultures were also in the

area, leading biologists to believe that there was a carcass in the cove. Condor #71 was also seen with a full crop, which means she fed on a carcass that she found on her own

## **Notes from the Field, September 1999**

An intense lightning storm ripped through the Big Sur coastline on the evening of September 8, 1999 sparking 13 wildfires. Two of the fires are located dangerously close to the condor release site. With both fires threatening, we chose to evacuate the captive condors (AC-8, #204, and #209) on September 15, 1999. They were moved to a secluded Big Sur ranch away from immediate fire danger and placed in temporary holding pens.

AC-8, #204, and #209 have adjusted to their temporary homes and are doing very well. These two fires are projected to burn through October 1999 or longer. One fire is burning three miles to the east of the release site, and the second is approximately four miles to the south. Both are steadily moving toward the site, although fire crews continue to cut lines in an effort to contain the fires. In 1985 the "Rat Creek Fire" burned 50,000 acres of Big Sur coastline, including the same area where we now conduct the condor releases.

The nine wild condors have remained near the site throughout the month with few excursions into the Big Sur Valley. The fires have affected the weather a great deal with heavy smoke and this may be a contributing factor to their lack of movement. The air traffic (helicopters and large planes) near the site has increased sharply since the start of the fires and may also be reducing the condors' willingness to leave the canyon.

A Condor Relief Fund has been set up to help pay the unexpected expenses related to the fire. Donations may be sent to (checks payable to) -- Ventana Wilderness Society/ Condor Relief Fund, P.O. Box 894, Carmel Valley, CA 93924.

## **Notes from the Field, August 1999:**

Condors AC-8 (for Adult Condor No. 8), #204, and #209 arrived at Monterey Airport from San Diego Wild Animal Park via Jet, courtesy of Million Air Monterey, on August 5, 1999. The three condors were then transferred in trucks up to the David P. Usher Rearing and Release Facility in Big Sur, CA.

Condors #204 and #209 are a little over three months in age and will be released this winter with four other young condors that will be arriving at the facility on November 2, 1999. Both chicks have adjusted well to their new Big Sur home and are growing stronger with each day. Both of these condors are residing in separate cave-like chambers that view into a large flight pen. Inside the flight pen they can watch this year's mentor condor, AC-8.

Condor AC-8 has had a very interesting life. She was first observed in the 1960's nesting in the wild in southern California. She continued to nest in the wild up until her capture in 1986. AC-8 produced the last egg to be laid in a wild nest, but her egg was taken to the San Diego Wild Animal Park to be incubated and hatched. She has spent the past 20 years at the San Diego Wild Animal Park producing the offspring that have brought the condor back from the brink of extinction. She is mother to 12 offspring in captivity and grandmother to many of the young, wild condors. AC-8 is considered a genetic "founder bird", one of the oldest condors left. Her exact age is unknown, the best guess is 40+ years old. AC-8 last bred in captivity in 1995 and is believed to be past her breeding age. This is her first year as a mentor and we feel her "motherly intuition" will be very valuable to this year's birds.

AC-8's presence in the flight pen has already attracted the attention of the nine wild Big Sur condors. They have been regular visitors to the flight pen over the past month. AC-8 does not seem to be very interested in the wild birds; they are still very young and have a lot yet to learn about life in the wild, and she seems to know that. The wild condors, on the other hand, are completely fixated with her and unsuccessfully attempt to break into the flight pen. Due to AC-8's presence, as a "magnet", the wild condors reduced their movements this month. Condor #94 flew north of Pt. Sur and found a dead sea mammal on the beach early this month. She was seen at the carcass with multiple turkey vultures, and has been observed flying with turkey vultures more than any other condors in Big Sur.

## **Notes from the Field, July 1999:**

This month the blue-tagged condors, who have been in the wild for 19 months, were captured for a routine exam. The condors were trapped by biologists using a large, walk-in type trap. The trap was baited with a calf carcass and the door left open for a few days prior to the scheduled trap date in order to allow the birds to get used to a new structure in their environment. The condors found the trap very interesting and were soon playing on it and feeding inside. Then, on July 6, biologist Jason Meyer was stationed in a blind near the trap with a rope attached to the door which he pulled shut when all of the condors had entered. Condors B61, B64, B67, B70, B71, and Y90 were trapped and removed one by one from the trap. Biologists took a blood sample from each bird which were analyzed for evidence of diseases and toxins, such as lead. Then each bird was fitted with a new patagial wing tag bearing their identification number and new radio-transmitters. Condors Y68, Y92, Y94 and eagle 6G were at the release site that day and circled overhead, investigating the activity as the condors were being temporarily handled. Fortunately, all blood sample results were within normal limits as determined by Michael Murray, DVM, the VWS Condor Program Veterinarian.

The condors spent most of the remainder of the month at the release site, feeding and lounging around their condor-sized bird bath. Y94 continued to spend time at the El Sur Ranch, a large cattle ranch near Andrew Molera State Park. She was seen on the ranch in close proximity to a cow carcass which turkey vultures had fed upon.

One of the bald eagles, 6G, released from the condor release facility in June, left the release site before she was able to find food on her own. She was not observed feeding for 14 days so biologists captured her and returned her to the facility on July 5. After a week in the facility, eating well and recuperating from her adventure, 6G was released again on July 11. The male eagle, 6H, had been feeding regularly on fish provided for him at the release site. The condors were also seen feeding on the fish, right along side the eagle. It appeared that 6H had been accepted by the condors as one of the flock. However, only a week later both eagles left the canyon and have not returned. The condors certainly enjoyed finishing the leftover fish.

Condor watching locations: Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park, Highway 1 pull-offs between the Esalen Institute and the Little Sur River.

### **Notes from the Field, June 1999:**

The condors had their first interactions with bald eagles this month. The two bald eagles, 6G(female) and 6H(male), were released mid-June from the condor rearing facility. At approximately 7-8 weeks in age, 6G and 6H were transferred from San Francisco Zoo to the Big Sur release site. The condors were intrigued with 6G and 6H even before release, curiously watching them from outside the flight pen. Just after release, not having discovered their full physical potential, 6G and 6H were easily intimidated by the condors. The tables are quickly turning though. 6H recently flushed B71 from a feeding site. The condors are becoming more aware of the potential dangers presented by the young eagles, who grow stronger with each day. We hope both the condors and eagles will associate each other with feeding and lead each other to potential foraging sites in the future. We have already observed the condors following turkey vultures to a sea lion carcass, and we hope for a similar result with the eagles.

The presence of 6G and 6H at the release site preoccupied the condors for most of the month. Condor movements were mainly north into the Big Sur valley. Condor Y94 made a flight over two potential condor foraging areas. The first area is a large ranch with approximately 1000 head of cattle, and the second area is a large, 2-mile stretch of protected beach adjacent to the ranch. Y94 has been observed in these two areas flying with turkey vultures, who forage here on a regular basis. We are very confident turkey vultures will lead Y94 and other condors to a wild carcass in the near future.

Condor watching locations -- Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park.

## Notes from the Field, May 1999:

Condors B61, B70, B71, and Y68 flew as far south as Morro Bay, CA this month. A few hikers in that region were fortunate enough to actually see these condors as they were passing through. B64, B67, and Y92 flew to the north as far as Pico Blanco, passing over potential foraging areas on El Sur Ranch in Big Sur. Y90 and Y94 flew down to Grimes Point, the same area where we observed B64 and B71 foraging on a sea lion a couple of months ago. Both condors flew over the sea lion colony, but didn't have any luck finding a carcass to forage on.

Condor Y80 was brought into captivity earlier this month for behavioral reasons. Y80 showed an increasing interest in humans and actually began to approach people. Attempts to flush Y80 failed and the decision was made to bring her back into captivity. Y80 is currently being held at the US Fish & Wildlife Service's condor facility in Ventura, CA.

There are currently nine condors residing in the Big Sur area. Good condor viewing locations include Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, Cone Peak, and the east side of Andrew Molera State Park.

## Notes from the Field, April 1999:

On April 17, 1999 condor Y30 was located by VWS biologists at the Big Sur release site. Y30 is a 4-year old female that was released into the wild on February 13, 1996 from the US Fish & Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Santa Barbara County release site. She is one of 22 condors in the wild in southern California (excluding the 10 Big Sur Condors). Y30 has yellow tags similar to the 5 yellow-tagged Big Sur condors and this caused some confusion to biologists at first. Shortly thereafter Y30 was identified at a feeding site with the other condors. Biologists Susan Jackson and Nadine Bader noted that her head is partially pinkish-red and that she has also been a dominant force at the feeding site, pushing the younger birds out of the way with ease. The younger, Big Sur birds still bear the fuzzy, black heads that are characterized by juvenile condors 1-2 years old. Y30 won't achieve the full pinkish-red head until she reaches breeding age at 6-7 years old.

The arrival of Y30 sparked the biggest flights ever recorded for the Big Sur cohort. B61 and B70 flew to Santa Barbara County, approximately 125 miles south. Both were in the vicinity of the southern California condors, but there was no visual confirmation that they interacted or saw other condors of that group. Y80, B64, B67, B71, and Y68 didn't go quite as far, but did manage to make it into the southern reaches of San Luis Obispo County, approximately 80 miles south of Big Sur. Y90, Y92, and Y94 chose to stay behind with Y30 and fly locally as far as 5 miles from the release site.

The meeting of the Big Sur and southern California condors has been long anticipated, and the benefits to both cohorts will be long-standing. The range expansion will help

meld the two groups into one as they begin to refill the niches that they historically occupied. Y30 was the first to make contact and is showing no immediate signs of leaving Big Sur. In southern California she is low in the condor hierarchy. Perhaps she is enjoying her spot at the top here amongst the Big Sur condors. A big thank you goes out to the USFWS condor crew for aiding VWS biologists in tracking the Big Sur condor movements in southern California.

## **Notes from the Field, March 1999:**

The yellow-tagged condors (Y68, Y80, Y90, Y92, and Y94), signified by a "Y" before their numbers, have all made flights out of the release site canyon and successfully returned. Y68 set out on a journey that took him around the entire northern half of the Ventana Wilderness Area, a flight of approximately 120 miles. Y68 is a year older than the other yellow-tagged condors and this may help explain why he took such a large journey after being out in the wild for only 2 months. We also have reason to believe that Y68 may have fed on the carcass of a large range cow while traveling on his 18-day long sortie. The carcass was reported to us by a biologist at Fort Hunter Liggett after we had lost Y68's signal for a couple of days. We never observed Y68 at the carcass, but are presuming he did feed there to help fuel his 18 days of travel.

Y79 and Y89 were captured and returned to Los Angeles Zoo in mid-March. Both condors began to show an affinity to humans and the situation worsened when they began to endanger themselves. We are still analyzing why these two condors were attracted to people. The other yellow-tagged condors have not shown this type of behavior. Y79 and Y89 will most likely be separated and re-released elsewhere.

The older, blue-tagged condors (B61, B64, B67, B70, B71), signified by a "B" before their numbers, continue to make huge breakthroughs. Biologists discovered B64 and B71 feeding on a sea lion carcass in an isolated cove along the Big Sur coastline. The cove, located south of Grimes Point, is an active sea lion rookery (breeding area) and also a nesting site for a pair of peregrine falcons. Shear, rocky cliffs descend approximately 600 feet down to the cove from Coast Highway 1, offering more than adequate protection from human disturbance and terrestrial predators such as coyotes. The sea lion carcass was lodged between two large boulders on the rocky beach of the cove. As many as 13 turkey vultures were observed soaring in the cove or feeding on the carcass. The turkey vultures may have led B64 and B71 to the carcass site. The condors have been communally roosting and soaring with the turkey vultures since the Fall of 1998. Condors Y80 and Y94, both released in January, made exploratory flights over the cove but didn't venture too far down due to a possible lack of flight experience. Nonetheless, we're almost positive that they saw B64 and B71 on the beach below. This is the first documentation of condors foraging on marine mammals along the Big Sur coast in over 100 years.

## **Notes from the Field, February 1999:**

Condors 68, 79, 80, 89, 90, 92, and 94 spent most of their first month in the wild learning how to fly. February provided the young condors with a few sunny, clear days to improve upon this skill. The biggest impact upon the young condors this month was the return of the older condors (61, 64, 67, 70, and 71) to the release site. The older condors immediately took the upper hand, chasing the younger condors away from the carcasses. After the older condors grew tired of dominating the younger ones, and had amply fed, they began to warm up to the new birds. As the month wore on the older and younger condors began to preen one another and even started roosting together in the same trees. The younger birds have made attempts to follow the older birds on their daily sorties, but end up turning around and coming back to the safety of the release site.

Hoinewut's impact on the young condors was immeasurable this year. Hoinewut, an adult male condor, resided in the David P. Usher release facility's flight pen to serve as a mentor to the seven young condors before and after their release. Hoinewut was not released with the seven young condors due to his genetic value in the captive breeding program and remained in the flight pen to help the young birds make a smooth transition into the wild. Condor 90 developed an interesting relationship with Hoinewut. After release, biologist Aimee Decker observed Hoinewut walk over and feed condor 90 through the fence of the flight pen. This altruistic behavior of an adult condor feeding a juvenile condor that is not one of their own has rarely been documented. Hoinewut was returned to the LA Zoo mid-February and we hope to have him as a mentor once again next year.

## **Notes from the Field, January 1999:**

On January 30, 1999, seven young condors (#68, 79, 80, 89, 90, 92, & 94) entered into the wild for the first time. Surprisingly, the first of the seven to leave the flight pen was the youngest condor, #94. The oldest of the seven, #68, was the last to venture into the wild. All seven condors had notably good first flights. The flights were short and conservative which is what we like to see. Long and uncontrolled flights can carry the birds dangerously down into steep canyons where getting out can be difficult. Before release, the seven young condors were visited twice by the five older birds. The older birds were very curious with the new condors and spent a few days perched outside the flight pen. The young birds were able to visually interact with the older condors and watch them fly in and out of the release site. These visual interactions may have contributed to the young condors flying so well on release day.

Hoinewut, the adult mentor for the seven young condors, was not released and will remain in the flight pen to continue his mentoring. Hoinewut's presence in the flight pen will help the seven young condors from straying away from the release site too soon and aid them in their transition into the wild.



The older condors have yet to meet up with the younger birds, although we anticipate it to occur sometime in mid to late February. The older five continue to forage on the eastern ridges of the Big Sur Valley and are still roosting, as they did for most of December, with large numbers of turkey vultures in the tops of tall redwood trees. Short days and winter storms have limited movements and have kept the birds somewhat grounded. The longest flights recorded were back to the release site, approximately 12 miles from their current location.

## **Notes from the Field, December 1998:**

The big news this month was the arrival of six California Condor chicks from the L. A. Zoo. The chicks were flown up from L. A. on Dec. 2 and joined "Hoinewut",

who is a captive adult mentor, and #68 in Ventana's rearing and release facility. We are happy to report that all six chicks are healthy and socializing well with each other. The chicks spent most of the month in a large rearing pen which looks out on "Hoinewut" and #68 in the flight pen, allowing the young birds to observe and learn from the older birds. On Dec. 31, the chicks "graduated" from the rearing pen to

the flight pen where direct interaction with the older birds will continue to foster their growth and learning. The release date for the six chicks and #68 has been set for Jan. 30, 1999. "Hoinewut" will remain in the flight pen indefinitely.

The five free-flying condors that were released last December had a relatively quiet month. They spent a lot of time exploring the giant redwoods of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park and the rocky crags of Mt. Manuel. This serene time ended abruptly on Dec. 21 when the free-flying birds flew back to the facility and discovered the eight captive condors. This was the first visit by the free-flying condors to the facility

since the arrival of the new batch. Very curious by nature and still very young themselves (20-22 months old), the free birds played on and around the flight pen for a few days, arousing the interest and excitement of the birds inside. But on Dec. 23 there was nearly a disaster. Number 64, one of the free birds, managed to entangle his neck on a flight pen rope and was hanging limp, near death, before a Ventana biologist rushed to his rescue. Number 64 ran away coughing and then flew away, a good sign that he did not sustain any serious neck injury from the incident. Subsequent observation has assured us of #64's good health and modifications to the flight pen have ensured that such an incident can not happen again.

The birds left the facility area on Christmas Day, returning to the mellow confines of the Big Sur River Valley, having made a strong connection with the birds that will soon join them in the wild.

## Notes from the Field, November 1998:

The five free-flying condors in Big Sur have been moving consistently throughout their range during the past month. They have been actively searching for food and have been successful in finding carcasses in new feeding areas. At one of these feeding areas we placed coyote-proof fencing around the carcass. We had been having a problem with coyotes eating and dragging off carcasses, especially in this particular area. The fencing proved very effective in that the birds did make it over the fence and fed off the carcass for several days, and the carcass remained untouched by the coyotes.

Since the beginning of November all five birds have spent over half of their nights roosting in a stand of redwoods in which turkey vultures also roost.

On 28 October two birds from the L.A. Zoo, Hoinewut (Hoi) and 168, were transferred to the VWS rearing and release facility. Hoi is our captive adult mentor for the 6 chicks that will arrive 2 December. Condor 168 is 1.5 years old and is of the same cohort as the free-flying birds in Big Sur. He will be released with the chicks in mid-January. Both have adjusted well to the new facility and surroundings.

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## Condor Facts

Range: In 1800, from Baja California to British Columbia; reintroduced populations in central and southern California and in northern Arizona

Food: Carcasses of large animals such as deer, cattle and sea mammals

Wingspan: Up to 11 feet

Weight: 20 to 25 pounds

Life Span: 60 to 80 years; they mate for life

Reproduction: One egg every two years in the wild

Flying Ability: Over 150 miles in a day

### **Condor watching locations:**

- \* Andrew Molera State Park, Big Sur, CA
- \* Böttcher's Gap, Big Sur, CA
- \* Jack's Peak, Monterey, CA
- \* Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, Big Sur, CA
- \* Jack's Peak, Monterey, CA