

## California Condors AC2 and AC3

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California Condor *Gymnogyps californianus* AC2 and his mate AC3 were first seen on 9 January 1976 by Dick Smith and myself as they soared along the escarpment of West Big Pine in the Santa Barbara back country. (There is an assumption that AC2 is the same bird throughout this history). AC3 was identified by Noel Snyder as being the same female that nested at Indian Creek in 1972. He determined this by examining the egg shells that came from the various nestings in Santa Barbara County during the period 1972 to 1985.

The pair was found nesting on the escarpment, successfully fledging a chick in 1976. The fate of that chick is unknown. In 1977, the pair nested in the same cave. Again, the chick successfully fledged that year. Again the fate of the chick is unknown. The only clue we have is that AC4 and UN1 were identified as possibly being the offspring of the Santa Barbara pair through genetic study. The stud book lists UN1's possible birthday as 1976 and AC4's about 1980. This last date is too late as all nestings were monitored from 1980 on through 1985 so we know the fate of each egg.

In 1978 and 1979, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History funded only enough time and dollars for a one day per month trip into the back country. The pair was always seen but the nesting sites, if any, were not found during those two years.

With the founding of the Condor Research Center in 1980, more resources were available for locating nest sites and monitoring them every day once they were found. Many days were spent in the field by a combination of cooperating agencies, volunteers and a few paid biologists.

The following is a catalogue of the nestlings of AC2 and AC3 from 1980 through 1985:

**1980** AC2/AC3 nested in Big Pine Canyon on the north side of the escarpment. The egg hatched but the chick died of stress during a measuring and weighing trip on 30 June. This death put a stop to a newly issued permit to trap condors for radio telemetry. The permit was not reinstated until two years later.

**1981** AC2/AC3 again nested on the West Big Pine escarpment in the same cave used in 1976 and 1977. This nest was watched every day. When the normal hatching date was well past, the CRC team climbed up to the nest and determined that the egg had failed and the chick died, either at or during, hatching.

**1982** AC2/AC3 nested in Don Victor Valley, more than eight miles away from what we thought was their core area at West Big Pine. Again a constant nest watch was instituted from mid-April, when the nest site was finally discovered, until the end of October. This chick fledged successfully and survived

until Thanksgiving time, November 1983. The chick, known as Bosley, was killed by cyanide found in an M-44 "coyote getter". The event changed the way the predator control arm of the USFWS placed out M-44s in condor country. They now were ordered to place only one, not two M-44s, in a set.

**1983** An important nesting took place this year when AC2/AC3, with AC2 now carrying a radio and AC3 with distinctive notches in several feathers of her wing, nested back at the old 1972 Indian Creek nest site. This egg was taken for the captive breeding program, hatched and was a female named Almiyi. Because observers were out in the field constantly, we noted the pair driving Bosley away from the nest site. Bosley had fledged early September and thus came from an egg laid early in the season. The 1983 egg was laid late in April. This proved once and for all that condors could, contrary to Koford's thesis, lay eggs in successive years even though the chick from the previous year survived. Using this knowledge, it was possible to increase the reproductive rate of captive condors. Formerly (and still quoted all the time) is the statement that condors lay one egg every other year. Now we knew that it was possible for condors to lay two eggs in three years with a surviving fledgling.

**1984** Two nestlings by AC2/AC3 in 1984. The first egg was removed from Mono Narrows on 12 February and taken to San Diego Zoo. The egg hatched and the chick was named Ojai. The second nest was situated on Madulce Peak. The egg was taken on 18 March to the Zoo. The egg

hatched. The chick was named Yosemite but it died a few days later from a bacterial infection.

**1985** Three nestings by AC2/AC3 in 1985. The first egg came on 14 February from a different cave on the Madulce cliffs. This egg hatched. The chick was named Kaweah, the only male produced by this pair. The second egg was laid back at the West Big Pine Nest site on 18 March 1985. This egg failed to develop properly and thus no chick survived from this nesting. If you watch the Audubon film narrated by Robert Redford called "Condor" you will see the E-Team do an egg pickup. The last nesting of this pair occurred in Bluff Canyon on Big Pine Mt. on 15 April. The egg was incubated by the pair until concern for the egg's safety (ravens were cruising too close to the nest and ravens were a known predator of condor eggs) brought about a nest climb where the fertile egg was taken to the zoo and replaced with a dummy egg to keep the pair close to the nest. On 17 June the dummy egg was taken, thus releasing the pair from incubating duties. This egg hatched and the female chick was named Malibu. In all, nine eggs were laid and four chicks hatched for the captive breeding project from this pair.

**1985/6** In mid December 1985, biologists noted that AC3 was remaining at Bitter Creek (then Hudson Ranch) while AC2 returned to the roost areas in Santa Barbara Co. A constant watch was set up to monitor the AC3's behaviour. It became evident that she was very ill. After several attempts,

she was run down, captured and taken to San Diego Zoo where she was found to be suffering from severe lead poisoning. Despite a major effort by zoo personnel, AC3 died on 18 January 1986. This was the end of the five original nesting pairs found by the biologists of the CRC. AC3's death also ended the discussion about whether to trap all remaining condors for captive breeding or to leave a few wild birds out to be mentors to released captive bred condors. The order went out to trap all remaining condors and any hope for a surviving wild population vanished.

By the time all the birds were taken into captivity, we had learned that the nesting area for AC2/AC3 covered about 64 square miles (16,576 ha) of the Sisquoc, Santa Cruz, Mono and Indian watersheds. Access to the area was either by the Big Pine Administrative Road or by way of the Pie Canyon Jeepway through Potrero Seco. Thus the pair could fly from a nest site on West Big Pine to Don Victor Valley in about 20 minutes and it would take a single observer about six to seven hours to cover the same ground.

The following ten California Condors were trapped in the wild and brought into captivity, all but one during the time of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife/National Audubon Condor Research Center era during the period 1980 to 1988. These are really important birds as they experienced life in the wild as opposed to those condors hatched from wild eggs or from breeders in captivity. To further explain: A = adult; C = condor; and the number is the order in which they

were trapped, thus AC 2 is Adult Condor 2nd bird trapped for radio telemetry. The SB # is the stud book number kept by the San Diego Zoo of all condors related to the captive breeding effort. Three formerly wild condors have been released to the wild: AC2, AC8 and AC9. Only AC9 remains alive. He has bred with a female condor from the Ventana Wilderness Society's release efforts along the Big Sur coast of Central California. Both of his chicks had problems and were rescued and placed at the Los Angeles Zoo.

1. Topatopa – Captured 12 February 1967 as a juvenile bird near Matilija Creek. Too imprinted to be released. SB# 1.
2. UN1 - The female of the first breeding in captivity pair (along with AC4). Captured 7 August 1985. She died at the LA Zoo Mar. 10, 1999 SB#13.
3. AC8 – Female of the Agua Blanca Pair, taken into captivity on 6 June 1986, released at Hopper Ranch on 28 March 2000, shot by pig hunter on Tejon Ranch in February 2003. SB# 12.
4. AC9 - First chick ever seen hatched by the newly formed Condor Research Center in 1980, captured for captive breeding on 19 April 1987 thus causing the extirpation of the California Condor in the wild, released at Hopper Ranch May 2002. SB# 21.
5. Paxa – Trapped on Bitter Creek on 5 December 1982 as an immature. Still in captivity. SB# 23.
6. AC5 – Male of the Sequoia pair.

- Captured on Tejon Ranch, 27 Feb 1987. Still in captivity. SB# 7.
7. AC6 – Male of the Hardluck pair. Captured 21 April 1986. Still in captivity. SB# 5.
  8. AC4 – Male, unmated at time of capture on 25 June 1985. Still in captivity. SB# 20.
  9. Tama – female of the Red Rock pair and producer of AC9. Captured 6 September 1985. Still in captivity at the Oregon Zoo. SB# 11.
  10. AC2 – Male of the Santa Barbara pair. Captured December 1986. Released 22 June 2005. SB# 6.

To all you condor-lovers out there who could not make the release back to wild of AC2, here is an update. At 11h18 on 22 June 2005, AC2 was released by Jesse Grantham at the Bitter Creek (Hudson Ranch) upper pit trap site, the place he was captured for captive breeding in December 1986. So here he was, in a sky kennel, after 19 years in captivity and several weeks in a flight pen, ready to go back to the wild. He exited the sky kennel, waited there for some moments surveying his old foraging grounds, then took off in a soaring flight up Bitter Creek, where a group of about 30 people were watching, and flew out of sight to the west. I stayed at the Lone Tower OP while Jesse Grantham (Senior Staff Biologist at the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura, California) and Allan Mee (post doc. associated with CRES at the San Diego Zoological Society and primary researcher on the breeding biology of the released California Condors) searched for

him. They had signals from the Ballinger Canyon area that evening. The next day, 23 June, Mike Caccaipaglia (an intern with the Hopper National Wildlife Refuge) and I went searching for him. His signal remained the whole day coming from the ridge that forms the SE boundary of Ballinger Canyon ORV area. That evening we formed a plan to search for AC2 along the ORV trails that crisscrossed the area. Fortunately Mike Caccaipaglia held an ATV certificate, so we loaded up the vehicle and headed for the canyon on 24 June. After many rides on the trails, known as Deer Park Trails, Mike Caccaipaglia located AC2 at the very far south-eastern ridge, perched in a pinon pine. Around 14h00, AC2 took off and flew across Hwy. 33 and over to the Cuyama Peak Ridge and roosted in an area known as Dry Canyon. Since that time, AC2 has been seen feeding on the carcasses set out on Bitter Creek and has been roosting near Big Pine/Madulce. Those areas are his home base, where he and his mate AC3 nested and roosted in the 1980s.

Update: Sadly, AC2 was found dead at Bitter Creek NWR on 27 September 2005. His signal had been heard coming from Madulce area and out to Bitter Creek on the 23rd, but a mortality signal was not heard until the 27th. At that point several USF&S personnel followed the signal down the canyon and found him dragged under a bush and partially scavenged. It was not possible to determine cause of death.

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