

Condors can fly forever, but they're still in trouble

Tom Stienstra

High above a coastal ridge in the Ventana Wilderness, three California Condors sailed in wide circles. The condors' nine foot wingspans were giant black silhouettes against the sky. We drove another half mile south on Highway 1 and then parked on a dirt pull-off, eager to scan the hills with binoculars. To my shock, just 20 feet away, I found myself looking into the ruby eyes of a condor. It was perched on the brink of a cliff, just beyond a guard rail, overlooking Sea Lion Cove and the Pacific Ocean. The condor stared straight at me as if wondering when I might be ready for consumption. Never in my life would I have dreamed of squaring up face-to-face with a condor. It felt like a glimpse of a modern-day Jurassic Park. This was last week at Big Sur and the neighboring Ventana, located south of Monterey on the central California coast. It turns out that the condors' best friends here have turned out to be great white sharks, orcas and disease. That is because the predators and infections can kill sea lions, and when the carcasses wash up on the beach, the feasts commence for the condors. It was only nine years ago when the first group of five condors was reintroduced into the wild at Big Sur/Ventana. This followed the crisis of the mid-1980s, when the number of condors on the planet had been reduced

to only 27. All of them were captured by scientists for a captive breeding program, directed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and several other agencies. That program has jump-started the current population. There are now 273 birds in all, including 25 at Big Sur/Ventana, 13 at the Pinnacles in San Benito County, 59 in Southern California, primarily at the Sespe Condor Sanctuary, with the rest remaining in the captive breeding program. Despite this breakthrough, it's not all good news, explained Joe Burnett, a senior biologist for the Ventana Wildlife Society, who monitors the birds. "We're averaging about 30 percent mortality per year, or 70 percent of birds released are surviving," Burnett said. "For the population to survive on its own, we need survival to be 90 percent. As the population builds, we're hoping that mortality decreases." He said most deaths occur when the giant birds fly into power lines and are electrocuted. Some of the birds have died with elevated levels of lead, a significant concern and the focus of ongoing studies. The condor is the largest flying bird in North America. With a wingspan that can reach nearly ten feet, they glide like a top-secret military aircraft. In a single flight, a condor is capable of flying more than a mile high and traveling 350 miles from its nest. They can glide for hours

without a single wing beat, using the lift from rising thermals. They are so big at birth that it can take a week for a baby condor to hatch from an egg. To survive, they require vast wild lands to roam. Seeing them at Big Sur, even from a great distance with binoculars, is a euphoric sensation. Up close and personal, it can

send electric sensations down your spine. After all, the endangered giant bird with ancient roots is making a comeback. For monthly field updates, go to ventanaws.org, the Web site for the Ventana Wildlife Society. Scientists here are funded by grants, memberships and donations.

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