

## ***New kid on the block***

### ***A condor chick takes flight near Fillmore***

***Chuck Graham***

For only the second time since 1992, a California Condor chick fledged in the wild in a remote canyon near the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge, just north of Fillmore. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has been releasing endangered condors since 1992, numbered the 6-month-old chick 412. The fledgling with the characteristic black face took its first flight back on 22 October, venturing out about 15 feet from its cliff-top nest. Since then, the young scavenger has made short, regular flights from its nest site. At least one of the parents has been keeping a watchful eye on their young bird as it explores its new surroundings. The proud parents are also young – both are five years old. Condors don't reach maturity until they are eight years old. The female is numbered 237 and the male 245. Both were released at Hopper Mountain, and they'll continue to care for their chick for the next 18 months. "These were first-time parents," said Chris Barr, deputy project leader at Hopper Mountain. "They've been great parents and we've learned a lot from them. They've been very attentive and caring." Most first-time condor parents fail in their initial attempts to hatch out that first egg. This chick was born on 2 May, near the service's California Condor Recovery Program. It is the first chick to fledge in the wild in California since 2004, since captive-bred condors were reintroduced 14 years ago.

There are now seven wild-born condors in the wild. The other five are soaring in Arizona. According to Barr, the 2004 fledgling – also from Hopper – is doing extremely well. It's followed the adult population over to Bittercreek National Wildlife Refuge, near the southern Carrizo Plains, and has stayed since some other young condors were recently released at the refuge. "He's a great flier," he said. "He's doing everything a young condor should be doing in the wild." Fortunately, no condors were lost during the Day Fire; the blaze stayed seven miles north of the Hopper complex. "This is a significant event; each time a condor chick fledges in the wild, it brings us that much closer to the goal of recovery of this great bird," said Steve Thompson, manager of the service's California and Nevada Operations Office. There were three other eggs laid in the wild, but none of those made it to hatching. One other egg did hatch, but the chick died of unknown causes after two months. Those condors were also first-time parents and they were observed being harassed by another female condor. Barr said the second female may have caused the parents not to be as attentive as they could. Condor parents swap out on parenting duties and are the largest birds in North America. "We observed that breeding pair being bothered by the other female," he said. "Females compete for more dominant males."

The Condor Recovery Program expects breeding pairs to increase in 2007. Currently, there are six breeding pairs around Hopper Mountain, and more up in Big Sur at the Ventana Wilderness. Those birds have been known to make their way to Hopper. One breeding pair at Ventana had a nest in the cavity of a redwood tree this past spring, the second known nest of that type. With the new chick in the

wild, there are 128 condors flying free in California, Arizona and Baja, Mexico, with 156 in captive facilities at the Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park, the Oregon Zoo and the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. The goal of the recovery program is to have two geographically separate populations in California and in Arizona, with 150 birds and 15 breeding pairs in each population.

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