The return of the Thunderbird: book details efforts to save condor

Maria Jose Vinas

In the mid-1970s when John Moir spotted his first California Condor, all he could do was marvel at the two gigantic birds soaring hundreds of feet above him. "If you listen carefully as a condor passes close overhead, you can sometimes hear the air whistle through its flight feathers," Moir says. "The experience only lasted for a couple of minutes, but it filled me with joy and left a lasting impression," recalls Moir, a Santa Cruz writer. "It also made me wonder if I was ever going to see a condor again, because there were so few of them left." Thirty years later, Moir has written a vivid, detailed account of the efforts to save the endangered birds. "Return of the Condor" is about the struggle of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists to save the condor from extinction. The book describes the difficulties they faced, the criticism they endured and their final success in breeding captive birds. California Condors were nearing extinction when Moir saw the pair. When AC9, the last wild condor, was captured for breeding in 1987, only 27 of these birds remained in the world. The captive breeding program was a last desperate and controversial effort to try to save North America's largest bird, an animal with a wingspan stretching to nearly ten feet – double the span of a man's arms – and a weight that can exceed 21 pounds. Moir's story is a tribute to the magnificent condor, an animal known as the thunderbird by American Indians, who believed it could cause a storm by flapping its mighty wings. "As many people are, I was attracted to the bird itself," Moir explains when asked what compelled him to write the book. "The condor is an icon; it reminds us of a pristine wilderness we lost when European settlers came to America." A science journalist, Moir started writing articles about the condor in the 1990s. "As I got to know the biologists who worked with the bird, I became hooked on their stories and their sacrifices," says the author, who accompanied the naturalists on some of their field trips to monitor the condors. He hooks readers by describing vividly the biologists' strenuous work. Their shifts could include trekking up a mountain by flashlight at night, spending 16 straight hours recording the birds' movements and interactions, or hiding for long periods inside a grave-like pit trap hoping to capture a condor. Moir said writing the book has been "a great adventure" that has allowed him to travel all over California and Arizona, and talk with condor experts nationwide. He said his research for the book was an "enormous" undertaking: He interviewed more than 60 condor experts nationwide and spent several days diving into the condor archives. Efforts to save the bird were not without controversy, especially the captive breeding program and the "hands-on" approach to rescue the dying species from extinction. Moir writes that the issue raised passions on both sides.

Many biologists pleaded to give condors a last opportunity by breeding them in captivity, while some environmentalists advocated for "giving the bird the chance to save itself as a wild condor ... not an alien bird under house arrest." Moir said the condor's recovery story "is definitely about hope ... hope that by preserving the condor we open the way for protecting less majestic but equally vital species from extinction ... hope that by saving this ancient bird, we can save ourselves." With 137 wild California Condors now flying free in three Western states and Baja California and 152 birds in captive breeding programs, hope seems to be sustained.

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