Condor's biggest threat

A California Condor's dinner in the wild is often its biggest enemy

Maria Jose Vinas

Condors face many dangers in the wilderness, but one of the worst is lead poisoning from bullet fragments the birds swallow while eating carcasses or the discarded piles of guts of animals killed by hunters. The lead is quickly absorbed into the condor's bloodstream, causing a slow and painful death. Lead paralyzes a condor's digestive tract, and the bird finally dies of starvation weeks after having ingested the fragment. At least ten condors have died in California and Arizona from lead poisoning since the reintroduction program began in 1992, according to the Ventana Wildlife Society in Salinas.

Initiatives to ban the use of lead bullets in condor areas have failed, and now condor protectionists are trying to persuade hunters to switch voluntarily to condor-safe lead-free bullets. The Arizona Game and Fish Department has pioneered a program that distributes free copper bullets to hunters, and environmentalists are trying to convince hunters that lead bullets threaten not only condors but the entire food chain. The Ventana Wildlife Society is also seeking a California legislator to introduce a bill to provide hunters with lead-free ammunition. Meanwhile, biologists in the condor recovery program feed the birds stillborn calf carcasses, and they monitor the condors to check their blood levels for lead. 'It costs $10,000 a year to manage one condor in the wild, and if it gets lead-poisoned, the cost of the treatment alone is $5,000,' explains Kelly Sorenson, Ventana executive director. Lead bullets stand as one of the last barriers to the complete recovery of the condor, conservationists say. With a 90 percent success in the captive breeding programs, 'we have no problem in creating new birds; the problems start when they are released into the wilderness,' author John Moir says.

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