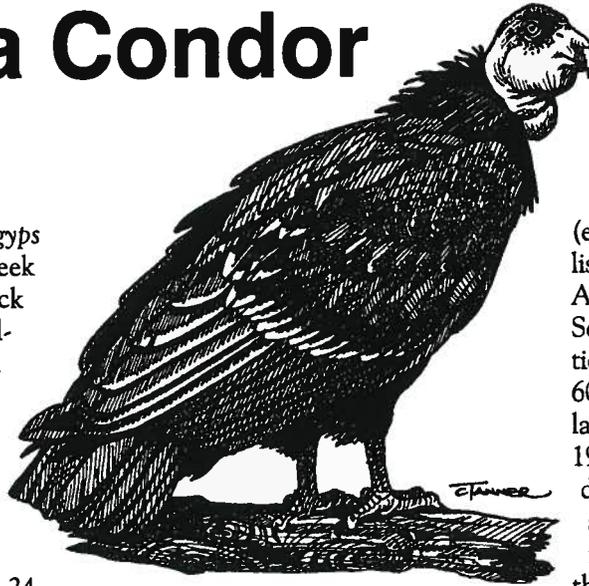


# California Condor

By Terry B. Johnson  
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**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Gymnogyps californianus*. From the Latinized Greek *gymnos*, meaning naked (head, neck unfeathered), and *gypos*, meaning vulture. The specific epithet is a Latinized form of California. Native American name: thunderbird.

**DESCRIPTION:** Length 40 to 55 inches. Wingspread 96 to 114 inches—largest living North American landbird. Weight 18 to 24 pounds. Sexes alike, males slightly larger. Adults mostly blackish; pure white underwing coverts and pale wing bar. Bare skin: head yellow to orange or pink; patch on lower side of neck purple-red. Eyes red, bill white, legs pink. Immatures: bare gray head and neck, mottled brown and white underwings. Adult plumage and skin color acquired at 5-7 years of age.

**HABITAT:** Recently in California—chaparral and coniferous-forest covered ridges and slopes of rugged mountains and canyons north of Los Angeles. Dependable updrafts for lift and protected caves for breeding probably more important than vegetation type.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Historically (pre-1900s)—British Columbia (Canada) across westernmost United States to Baja California (Mexico). Arizona records scant: most recently near Grand Canyon (1924: Williams); also perhaps Chiricahua Mountains (late 1800s). Pre-historic remains from caves in Grand Canyon.

**BIOLOGY:** These far-ranging scavengers, soaring or gliding along at up to 40 miles per hour, cover ground quickly. Night roosts in trees or on cliffs are abandoned as the birds leap into space to catch a morning updraft or thermal

(heated air). Condors also take flight directly from the ground by running for 40 feet or so and flapping their wings (ponderously). Given sufficient ground wind, they can also extend their great wings and lift off effortlessly. Once aloft, condors soar for hours. Not a feather moves, save for balance or redirection. The wings extend straight out like an eagle, with the slight upward tilt to the tips but little of the teetering of a turkey vulture.

California condors mate for life. Sometimes they reuse the same nest site repeatedly, but they usually alternate among several sites. They nest on bare ground in a cavity in a cliff (rarely in a tree), often using low escarpments. Wild birds lay one egg every other year, but typically lay another if the first is lost or removed early in the cycle. The bluish-to greenish-white egg, 6 inches long and weighing 0.5 to 0.6 pounds, is laid in February to May. Hatching occurs at 54 to 58 days. Both adults incubate, and brood the young constantly for about two weeks after hatching. The young make their first sustained flights at five to six months of age. At ten to 12 months they fly well, but most are fed by their parents through the second spring. Breeding begins in the sixth year.

**STATUS:** Among the rarest North American birds. Considered endangered

(extirpated) on the Department's 1988 list of Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona. Listed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered. The wild population dwindled from 150 in the 1940s to 60 in 1968, 21 in 1982 and 9 in 1985. The last wild bird was captured on April 19, 1987. Most strongly implicated in the decline were: (pre-1940s) shooting and specimen or egg collection and poisoning from ingested lead. Poisoning from the predicide Compound-1080 has also been speculated as a factor, but has not been well documented. Captive breeding brought the population to more than 80 by 1993. Test releases of Andean condors in 1989-90 proved so successful that young captive-bred Californians have since been released in southern California, though with mixed results.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Extensive tracts of wilderness, undisturbed roosts and nesting caves, abundant uncontaminated prey and carcasses, and relief from mortality caused by predator-control devices (e.g. coyote-getters), lead ingestion, other environmental contaminants and poisons. Condors are large and clumsy; fatal accidents have resulted from collisions with powerlines and drowning in a water tank. Some accidents may have resulted from the effects of poisoning, which impairs flight skills.

The California Condor Recovery Team considers northern Arizona a primary recovery site. The Department is working with the Team, Federal agencies and the public to determine whether reintroduction there is biologically appropriate and logistically feasible. Among the factors to consider are potential conflicts with other recreational activities, predator control programs and the need to maintain a post-release artificial-feeding program. All likely land-use conflicts appear to be resolvable. 🦅