

THE CONDOR

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF
WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY

Published by the
COOPER ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

VOLUME XXXVII

JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1935

NUMBER 1

MEETING THE CONDOR ON ITS OWN GROUND

WITH THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

By ERNEST I. DYER

Early in the summer of 1934 short articles appeared in daily papers scattered about the state, purporting to tell of the remarkable success of a "scientific expedition" that had penetrated the fastnesses of the south-central Coast Range of California and rediscovered and photographed a race of gigantic birds, hitherto believed extinct.

Depending, presumably, upon the fancy of the various writers responsible for these literary exercises, the birds were, in some articles, said to be South American Condors and in others: Californian. Accounts differed as to numbers and sizes, but the most favored figure seems to have been about 17, both for the number of birds seen and their wing-spread in feet.

In at least one journal of metropolitan standards, one of the birds was illustrated in the act of carrying off a fawn, and in the caption below the picture, the reader was informed that it showed how the bird was "capable of carrying a fawn in its talons"; thus perpetuating a popular fallacy and, at the same time, affording an excuse for a certain type of hunter to shoot them on sight, regardless alike of law and of sportsmanship.

As the present writer was a member of the party that unwittingly provided the slender basis of fact underlying all of this sensationalism, and the reaction to the articles, brought forth from different parts of the country, indicated a sincere concern for the birds and a legitimate desire for more reliable information, it is the primary purpose of this article to outline what actually happened.

The birds referred to were, of course, California Condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*), happily not yet extinct, as we all know, though sadly diminished in numbers, and now making what is believed to be their last stand against the heedless encroachments of man, to whom they have brought nothing but material benefit and pleasure.

The expedition, so called, was not one in a scientific sense at all. It was rather the expression of a generous act of hospitality on the part of old friends extending to their guests (of which the writer was one) the rare privilege which they, themselves, had enjoyed in the past, of seeing condors at close range in their native habitat, unembarrassed by artificial restraints and under conditions known by experience to be acceptable to the birds.

The ability of our hosts in inducing the condors to conform to a man-made time schedule seemed to partake of the miraculous, until we recognized that it was based on previous contacts with the birds, during which our hosts had acquired a working knowledge of their general habits. Thus, a week or two in advance, we were warned that preparations would be made that would require us to be at ranch headquarters on the evening of a certain date. On arrival there we learned that the condors had promptly acquiesced in the plans as anticipated, and that early the next morning we were to start for a run of sixty or seventy miles by motor, then proceed on horseback over a mountain trail for four hours and meet the condors at the rendezvous. And so it came to pass.

Some days in advance of our arrival, our hosts had prepared a blind near their mountain camp on a detached parcel of their holdings. The blind was intended for the use of such members as cared to photograph the birds at close quarters. It was partly below ground and partly above, with a naturalistic superstructure of branches from the chaparral nearby. About a hundred feet from the blind was placed the carcass of a superannuated horse as bait, carefully located with reference to angle of illumination and character of background.

Our cavalcade proceeded slowly from its initial elevation of about 2500 feet towards its destination, somewhat more than 2000 feet higher. When it was a half-mile or so short of the high pasture where the bait had been placed, and several hundred feet lower, our attention was directed to a cloud of birds milling about in the air above it.

Across, and around, and in and out of the circling mass of lesser birds: crows, ravens and turkey vultures, we descried greater forms gliding steadily and majestically in wider and unwavering orbits, and realized that we were, at last, beholding a portion—too large a portion—of the pitiful remnant of that great race that once ranged, even in historic times, from Baja California on the south, northward through the full length of Alta California up into Oregon and Washington, perhaps even farther.

The trail now passed along the bare face of a high ridge that formed one wall of a deep box canyon out of which rose huge, rounded masses of wind- and weather-sculptured sand-stone embedded in chaparral and thickets of maul oak. The trail dipped to the saddle that connected the ridge with the steep, wooded slope that leads to the rolling field over which the birds were flying. Here we were met by a reception committee (or perhaps an advance guard) of not less than three condors that had detached themselves from the whirling assemblage and sailed grandly over our heads, eyeing us keenly. Our hosts had overlooked nothing! The birds were so close that there was no difficulty in seeing the white patches under the wings of some of them and noting that not all of them had, as yet, acquired the characteristic pinkish-orange heads and necks of the adult.

Just before the rim of the upland pasture was reached, we dismounted in a hollow beneath oaks and conifers and peered carefully over its southern margin in the direction of the bait, which lay in the open near the crest of the box canyon end-wall. About 200 yards away and below us we saw the horse, surrounded and surmounted by condors, turkey vultures, ravens and crows, while above still milled and wheeled the concourse of birds first seen, in apparently undiminished number.

With 6x glasses, and with the naked eye, the writer distinguished and counted at the horse, simultaneously, 7 condors. How many were flying above at the same time was not ascertained, although it is believed that our initial reception committee of three or more was still on high.

It will be understood that we were not, especially at this moment, particularly

keen about gathering statistical data, and had it ever formed a part of our contemplated program, it is more than probable that we would have been disarmed by the rare spectacle before us. Moreover, we were supposed to be just on the threshold of our adventure. As a consequence, no effort was made to determine the absolute maximum of the number of condors present. However, 7 may be accepted with confidence as the absolute minimum seen at the time, with a strong probability that there were really not less than 10, counting those in the air.

One of the "horse-wranglers" of the party, an observant school boy whose duties require that he visit the field frequently, and to whom the sight of condors is no novelty, stood beside the writer at the time and announced that there were 11 condors at the horse and 7 in the air. Several days later, when he returned with horses to take the writer (the last of the party to leave) down the trail again, the subject was broached again casually and his count was unchanged, although it had never been questioned.

In passing, it may be noted that there is a fairly well established local belief that there are 25 or 30 condors resident in the general vicinity, though no systematic census seems to have been attempted. There is a pronounced tendency on the part of the "hill-billies" living in or near this sparsely settled region, to exaggerate (perhaps unconsciously) everything relating to condors; and newspaper reporters do not usually over-exert themselves to compress figures in the interest of verisimilitude. Game is abundant in this region, and the small ranchers derive considerable revenue from parties of hunters whom they pack into the mountains. They have no special interest, therefore, in under-estimating the attractions of the country, either in game or condors. Therein lies one of the principal sources of danger to the birds. The presence of hunters, among whom are inevitably many of irresponsible type, is a distinct menace.

There is a roofless adobe house at our hosts' camp site; roofless because every time the roof is rebuilt, hunters use it for firewood, notwithstanding that there is plenty of fuel available in the fire-scorched chaparral close at hand. This cycle has been repeated for several years in succession, so restoration has been abandoned. Men of the stripe that would do this sort of thing are, unfortunately, all too common among hunters, and would not hesitate to shoot a condor from pure wantonness. In this particular territory there is no protection from such men as long as hunters of all kinds are allowed access. Fortunately, most of the areas known as condor country are within the boundaries of National Forests, and it would seem possible to have certain areas set aside within such forests and close them to hunters, keeping them under federal control as sanctuaries.

To return from the digression: After watching the condors for a few minutes, we continued on to the camp by a trail concealed from them, so that they were not alarmed. About 4:30 we walked back by a different route through the open, rolling field, still concealed from the birds, except for about the last 120 yards. When we topped the last rise at that distance from the horse, all the birds flew off, except one condor that remained quietly standing on the ground near it. We had carried our cameras with us (still and motion picture equipped with telephoto lenses) although, as it was partly cloudy and threatening rain, it was not thought that there would be a favorable opportunity to use them to advantage, our chief reliance for pictures being centered upon use of the blind the next day.

As it turned out, it was highly fortunate that we did take the cameras, as we were about to have our last chance as well as our first chance to get close views, though we did not know it.

As a precaution against possible future failure, from the photographic point of

view, the two with cameras advanced slowly and alternately upon the bird upon the ground, the rest of the party remaining accommodately standing in the rear. We started taking pictures at about 110 yards distance, alternately. The condor soon flew to the top of a dead, broken-off pine tree, without increasing his distance from us, and was barely caught with the movie camera in the act of alighting.

We continued our cautious advance as before, taking pictures at intervals, until it proved that the bird was not in the least alarmed, judging by its actions. We then moved about freely at any distance from him suiting our convenience, the closest picture being taken at about 25 feet from him. He proved to be an ideal subject, patient and accommodating, watching us curiously as we set up tripods and shifted about to get different angles. He even tolerated the arrival of the rest of the party with perfect composure, looking down upon us from his superior height benignantly, moving only his head, and that but slightly, to follow our movements. As he seemed prepared to sit there forever in calm repose, and we wanted to see him display his wings, one of the members of the party volunteered to go up the tree and persuade him gently to alter his pose for our benefit. His only response to this encroachment upon his post was to concentrate his gaze upon the climber and wriggle the toes of his turkey-feet slowly. However, when a branch broke with a loud *cr-a-a-ck* under the weight of the climber, whose head was now about six feet from the bird, he raised and partly opened his wings, only to resume his former attitude when the climber retreated, after announcing that he suspected him of an intention of resorting to the turkey buzzard trick of disgorging the contents of his stomach upon him. We were not to have an opportunity of witnessing action of this kind!

It was interesting to note that the condor did not appear to be frightened by the sound of the human voice from the tree just below his feet, nor did he seem to be disturbed by the talk of the party surrounding him. The experience was evidently as novel to him as it was to us, and interest was about equally divided between the two parties.

The cameras had recorded his movements during this episode, but the action was all too short, so another of the party offered to throw a rope into the tree below the bird's feet. This action brought forth some fine displays of raised and partly spread wings (which were recorded on the films) before the bird decided to leave us and perch on one of the sand-stone outcroppings in the canyon below.

This individual was a young bird, still with black head and neck, but beginning to show a white ring around the base of the neck and white spots under the wings. (See fig. 1.)

The bird's bearing throughout this series of incidents won our great admiration for its self-respecting dignity. Its facial expression, if the term is applicable to birds, was at once, noble, innocent and gentle. Such at least was the impression made upon this writer: an impression that he is unable to describe in other terms. Figure 2, a "frame" from the motion picture, does not, perhaps, altogether support this view, but at the time it was taken the condor was just beginning to realize that we were in favor of more action on his part and was getting nervous.

Shortly after this series of episodes, which ended about 5 o'clock, some members of the party went down into the canyon a short distance and there again saw seven condors in what appeared to be a roosting place among the trees that were growing in and about the rocks. One wonders whether this number, seven, twice definitely noted on this day, several hours apart, has any particular significance when considered in connection with the same number reported at a later date (Condor, xxxvi, 1934, p. 255) by an independent observer at Sandberg's, on the "ridge road" in Los Angeles County.

Early next morning, before birds of any kind had appeared at the bait, two of us entered the blind and began a four hour watch. At the end of this time, five condors circled close above us, but did not visit the bait. Four of them lit in the



Fig. 2. The young condor shows first signs of uneasiness. (From motion picture film.)

same stub pine in which we had watched the young bird the day before, and the fifth upon its prostrate top just below. Unfortunately, this tree was directly behind us, with fire-killed brush intervening, and the blind was oriented in exactly the reverse direction. We waited patiently for the condors to approach the horse, but they, as well as all other kinds of birds, refused to do so and finally left. We had, however, a splendid, near view of the group of old and young birds distributed about in the bare branches. The adults, though more colorful, were far less attractive than the young birds, giving the impression of bearing upon their shoulders the full weight of the woes of a vanishing race, with their doleful countenances, sunken eyes and sagging cheeks, and (at least to the writer) unpleasant coloration of heads and necks. In flight, though, they were magnificent, sailing with impressive stability across fluctuating air currents without wavering or making obvious adjustments of wing surfaces, where even the turkey buzzard is unsteady.

During the rest of our stay, including the two days on which the writer was alone, no carrion birds of any kind were seen to visit the bait, despite the fact that almost constant watch was kept (mostly from a distance) from dawn until dark. Condors were seen with more or less frequency, flying about, every day, one or two at a time. Curiously enough, all the other flesh-eating birds were almost as scarce.

Examination of the bait before leaving showed that little noticeable progress had been made in its consumption since the first day, and that it was still only the tender, accessible parts that had been attacked at all. Various theories were advanced as to why the birds had apparently deserted the carcass after the first day, but the most tenable one seems to be that they had removed all portions susceptible of their attentions and were waiting for further decomposition to make profitable an attack

upon parts covered by the tough skin. This theory does not explain why they did not even visit the bait after the first day, unless we assume that they had either some conception of the time necessary to bring about the desired tenderness, or else means of checking progress, through the aid of their senses, while still in flight.

Comparison of experiences with those of a similar, but smaller, party at the same spot, about three years earlier (when five condors were seen simultaneously), showed that the birds behaved in exactly the same way on both occasions.

As a perhaps interesting speculation: Motion pictures taken the next day of two young birds in flight show clearly that at least one of them was not the same bird as the one watched on the stump (because of missing flight feathers in the bird flying, while the one on the stump had all feathers intact). (See fig. 3.) Thus we know that there were at least two youngsters in our group of birds. Two added to the five of a year ago again gives us the figure 7, suggesting that that represents the number more or less permanently resident in that particular locality. That, of course, is pure

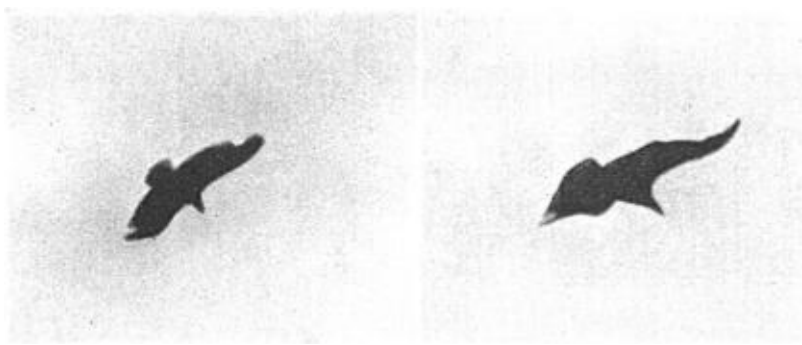


Fig. 3. Silhouettes of two young condors in flight, showing (left) wedge-shaped tail, and (right) extended head.

(From motion picture film.)

speculation, *but* the presence of young birds does most certainly prove that condors are at least reproducing their kind somewhere, now; and this is hopeful.

While, as already stated, our party was not inclined toward precise statistics, we were agreeably surprised at what appeared to be the relatively large proportion of young birds: positively not less than 2 out of 7, and conjecturally 3 out of 10.

In view of the foregoing, and considering that our observations were confined to a strictly limited area as compared with the vast extent of territory known to be physically suited to condors, and considering the short period of observation, the writer feels that the estimate of the total number of these birds now existent in California that is quoted by Dr. Wetmore (*Nat. Geog. Mag.*, LXIV, 1933, p. 64), "possibly ten", is unduly conservative. It seems altogether too improbable that our party, at one essay, should have the incredibly good fortune of securing practically instantaneously on demand, seventy per cent—perhaps even one hundred per cent—of all the condors in California, for its delectation!

On the other hand, sight must not be lost of the fact of the condor's great powers of sustained flight; so that a small number of birds, such as ten, might easily appear, as a whole or in part, with such frequency at widely separated points, as to create a false impression of large numbers and wide distribution of places of residence.

The birds are fairly often seen in open, flat country in the vicinity of ranch houses located near the mountains that they are known to inhabit. They are

repeatedly reported on unimpeachable authority along the Sespe, in Ventura County. We have had recently the Sandberg report above referred to. Two were reported in Santa Clara County, 50 or 60 miles from Oakland as the crow flies, in 1933, and the spot precisely located on a Geological Survey map, with only a slight element of doubt. The surrounding country differs but slightly from that where we watched the birds, though not usually classed as condor territory now.

The apparent ease with which our friends staged the exhibition of condors in their free state, in surprising numbers considering their rarity, tended perhaps to inspire in the minds of the spectators unwarranted optimism regarding the number remaining. Yet, even allowing for this circumstance also, the writer retains the impression that there are more of these birds in the state than is generally supposed to be the case.

As to their future prospects: The trend of their past history undeniably points to ultimate extinction unless conservation measures are promptly put into effect. The circumstance of our having seen young birds, added to the fact that condors are fairly frequently reported, does not necessarily imply that they are increasing, or even holding their own. Even a dying race may reproduce and experience temporary cyclic increases until near the end. Far better informed persons than the writer believe that, for the condor, this end is fast approaching. They need help!

Piedmont, California, November 28, 1934.

GEOLOGIC FACTORS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF BIRDS

WITH TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

By JUNE A. W. KELLY

Every student of biology at some time during the course of his studies asks himself the question "What are the causes that have led to the present distribution of plants and animals?" I feel that through the study of geology some light can be thrown on this subject.

It seems to me that the distribution of birds is both directly and indirectly influenced not only by the topography of the country but by the rock formations and soils resultant from their decay. I have barely begun my observations in this field but by presenting the material I have so far been able to gather from literature and from my own field work I might stimulate others to record their studies along these lines.

I have arranged my material under five headings beginning with the broader aspects of the relationship between geology and ornithology and ending with the more intimate relationship between the soil itself and the birds.

Great changes in land masses.—Although birds by their power of flight are able to cross great expanses of water, yet the great changes in land masses which have taken place from time to time during the past must have had their influences on avian distribution. The subsidences separated continents and formed islands. Opportunity was thus given for development without outside interference. In other cases elevations creating land bridges permitted the easy passage of species into new regions. With repeated subsidences and elevations birds of common ancestry may well have developed into different species, genera and even families. The advance of continental ice sheets must have wiped out whole orders from certain regions and crowded others into the remaining territory, thus giving rise to intense competition