

John Farrand, Jr. MOMENTS IN HISTORY

When California and the Condors Were Wild

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"When California was wild," wrote John Muir, "it was the floweriest part of the continent." Among the state's many other superlatives, Muir might also have noted that when California was wild, it was the stronghold of the continent's largest bird. California Condors were seen by Lewis and Clark along the Columbia River in 1805, and prehistoric remains have been found as far east as Florida and New York. But when the condor emerged from prehistory into history, it did so in California, and although it made its last stand as a

wild bird in the mountains north of Los Angeles, its early history centers around Monterey.

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Indians were also familiar with the condor's ability to spot a carcass quickly; along the San Joaquin River, the Western Mono called it *we-us-on*, which means "catches little boys sleeping." In the Costanoan dialect of the people at Carmel and Monterey, the word for condor was *wahsak*. They called their beautiful bay Sukilta.

The Spanish began exploring California in 1542, two decades after Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico, but another 60 years went by before the first recorded Spanish encounter with a condor. In May of 1602, three vessels commanded by Sebastián Vizcaíno sailed northward out of Acapulco, up the west coast of Baja California, and on to the wild shores of Alta California. Aboard the *Santo Tomás*, acting as the expedition's recorder, was Fray Antonio de la Ascensión, of the Discalced Order of Our Lady of Carmel.

On December 16 the ships reached Sukilta and anchored at its sheltered southern end. Vizcaíno promptly named the place Puerto de Monterey after the Conde de Monterey, Viceroy of New Spain. By January 3, 1603, when the expedition sailed northward again, Fray Antonio had noted: "There are other



California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*). Photo by Ted Schiffman/Peter Arnold, Inc.

birds of the shape of turkeys, the largest I have seen on the voyage. From the tip of one wing to that of the other was found to measure seventeen palms." One palm equals about eight inches, so Fray Antonio's measurement was more than eleven feet. The wingspan of an adult condor is only about nine feet, but because of this very exaggeration and Fray Antonio's comparison of the bird to a turkey, these few lines are accepted as the first mention of a California Condor by a European.

Vizcaíno's party left us the names Monterey and Carmel, but they didn't name the great bird that lived there. It was still the *wahsak*, and for more than a century and a half, nothing further was heard of it. Then, on October 8, 1769, less than two weeks before he discovered San Francisco Bay, Gaspar de Portolá camped beside a river near what is now Watsonville, a few miles north of Monterey. Close by was a village of Costanoan Indians where the annual sacrifice of a young *wahsak* may have been taking place. Father Juan Crespí, a member of the expedition, wrote: "In this place we saw a bird that the people had killed and stuffed with grass. To some it looked like a royal eagle [*águila real*]. It was measured from the point of one wing to the point of the other, and was found to be eleven palms. For this reason, the soldiers named the place the Río de Pájaro [River of the Bird]."

Father Juan's measurement of eleven palms is equivalent to a little more than seven feet. Such a small wingspan is usually taken as evidence that this bird was an immature condor, but those who thought it looked like an *águila real* might have been right. Even then, *águila real* was the usual Spanish name for the Golden Eagle, which has a wingspan of about eleven palms. Whatever the bird was, the river that flows past Watsonville is still called the Pajaro.

No such doubt surrounds the next Spanish record. In 1792, José de

Longinos Martínez, a botanist working along the California coast, secured a specimen and even came up with a scientific name of sorts. In a letter Don José wrote to a friend in Madrid, after he returned to Mexico from Monterey, he listed the specimens he was sending. Among them was something he called "*Vultur Harpyia* (varietas: *Monstruosa*)"—a name that can only have referred to a California Condor. However, the specimen was lost, and the letter and name weren't published until the 20th century, by which time they had become mere curiosities. One hundred ninety years had elapsed since Fray Antonio first reported the condor. There was still no formal scientific description, but this was soon to change.

Don José's letter is dated April 15, 1792. Nine months later, on November 14, H.M.S. *Discovery*,

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commanded by Captain George Vancouver, sailed into San Francisco. On board was the Scottish physician and naturalist Archibald Menzies. For the rest of the year and during part of 1793, the *Discovery* visited points along the California coast. No one knows for sure where or when Menzies obtained his specimen of the

California Condor, but it was almost certainly at Monterey, whose Spanish governor welcomed vessels of all countries. Of the roughly 96 days the *Discovery* spent at anchor in California waters, 56 were at Monterey. We know from Menzies' journal that Monterey was the one place in California where he made extensive collections.

Near Point Pinos on the Monterey Peninsula, on Wednesday, December 5, Menzies recorded that he and two companions "shot a new species of Hawk and several Quails, but the Country was so exceedingly dry and parched that we found but few plants in Flower." The "Quails" were the California Quail, and the "Hawk" was probably a California Condor, because the journal he kept in California mentions no other raptor.

Of the Indians at Monterey he wrote: "Their food at this time was chiefly shell fish, which the Women collected along shore, while the Men lounged about the Country with their Bows and Arrows, killing Rabbits and Quails, which they generally brought to us to barter for beads and other trinkets." Like José de Longinos Martínez before him, Menzies was primarily a botanist. He is remembered in the scientific names of the Douglas-fir, Pacific madrone, and bristleflower (the "piggy-back plant" of florists), and in *Menziesia*, a small group of shrubs related to the rhododendrons. Menzies discovered all of these plants during his voyage with Captain Vancouver.

The *Discovery* returned to England in 1795. The bird specimens collected by Menzies found their way into the hands of George Shaw, Keeper of the Zoological Department of the British Museum, who had the condor made into a mount and placed on exhibit. In 1798, he described it as a new species in Volume 9 of *The Naturalists' Miscellany*, a publication in which he and his co-editor, Frederick Polydore Nodder, described new species of all kinds that

were received at the British Museum. Shaw named the bird the Californian Vulture, *Vultur californianus*, and noted that "This Vulture was brought over by Mr. Menzies, during his expedition with Captain Vancouver, from the coast of California, and is now in the British Museum."

With Shaw's description, the first two centuries of the California Condor's recorded history came to a close. We all know what has happened during its second two centuries. The Costanoan Indians of Monterey, whom Fray Antonio noted for their gentleness, have fared no better. Never again will the great birds come gliding down to the beach at Monterey in the morning to scuffle around the carcasses of stranded whales. The last sacrifice of a young condor has been performed. No one calls it *wahsak* anymore, and the name Sukilta is forgotten; both are words in a language that ceased to be

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spoken many decades ago.

But there are still traces of that vanished era in California's history. Monterey, Carmel, and the Pajaro

River can be found on any road map. And locked away in a museum case in England, at Tring in Hertfordshire, is the original specimen of *Vultur californianus*, now *Gymnogyps californianus*. After two centuries, it is the only one of Menzies' bird specimens that survives. The head and neck wear a coat of dull pink paint. Part of the bill is missing and has been replaced with painted wax. Most of the lesser wing coverts are gone. The legs are damaged, having decayed before they dried out. One writer has described it as "a rusty and disreputable looking piece of museum property." Still, this tattered specimen is perhaps the ultimate souvenir of the time when California was still wild, and was the floweriest part of the continent. ■

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