

Shadow of the Condor My Saddest Bird Sighting

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Our second attempt to see one of North America's rarest birds, the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), in late May of 1985, began as the first did in early October of 1982. As my wife Nancy and I drove up the road to the top of Mt. Pinos we noticed it was not as frosty as in 1982, but still cold. Instead of brown vegetation there was now a carpet of low, tiny wildflowers. Green-tailed Towhees were singing and hopping among the boulders. There were not nearly as many hawks and eagles in the sky to cause us to leap for the spotting scope. Identifying the tiny lupines, locoweeds, paintbrushes, and other flowers helped pass the time of our lonely vigil. Alas, we realized (after four hours) that this would not be the place where a condor shadow crossed our path.

As before, we packed up and headed down the mountain for the well-known sign at the west end of the Los Padres National Forest. Our expectations and spirits were low so we didn't rush to this new location, taking two hours for the 30-mile trip. The gray dingy skies were offset by the tremendous display of wildflowers, a pleasant diversion.

As we arrived at the pullout at the sign, the sky turned distinctly primordial as we immediately spotted four large shapes circling a vast distance across the valley. These shapes were circling too slowly to be hawks or eagles. Out came the spotting scope. Condors!

There ensued an absolutely spellbinding two hours of continuous observation. We watched a total of six of these magnificent, prehistoric birds. The original four stayed grouped together while the other two occasionally joined, then separated from them. Without ever flapping, these great birds drifted back and forth from the hills two or three miles away to the higher hills to our right about half a mile away. Their size and slow manner disguised the speed at which they covered the territory. We watched awestruck and talked in hushed tones, hoping for a closer flyby. We were rewarded when the group of four assembled above the hills to our right and, one by one in line, flew right overhead. Details were visible and exciting in the spotting scope, but the murky skies made the birds appear as though they were fading away right before our eyes. They cast no shadow down on us. As they slowly glided away from us and eventually out of sight, we were saddened that this just might be true. Only nine condors were known to exist in the wild at that time.

Normally jubilant and talkative after sighting a new bird together, Nancy and I spoke very few words to each other on the drive to the motel. We both had a very personal reverence for this wonderful bird, and an unspeakable sadness about the birds' grim

future, and the fact that we may have been two of the last people to see such a group in the world for quite some time, or ever. The California Condor will survive forever in our memories.

Update:

In September of 1985, all the surviving California Condors were taken into captivity for captive breeding. They have bred successfully in zoos, and a number of the young have been introduced into the wild in their original range in California and to part of their historic range near the Grand Canyon in Arizona. In the summer of 2000, one of the original 9 birds, wing-tagged as AC-9, was returned to its home from which it was taken 15 years before. The future survival of this magnificent species is still uncertain, but not as precarious as it once was.