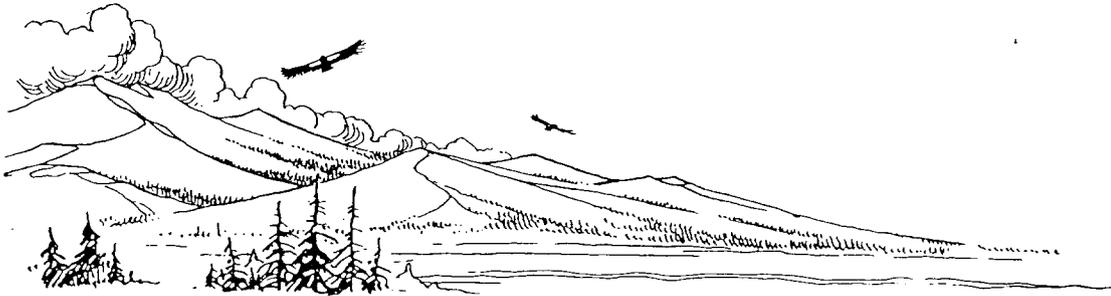




California condor, *Gymnogyps californianus*



The CALIFORNIA CONDOR, *Gymnogyps californianus*, is fast becoming a symbol of the conservation movement in America. Although probably never common, this, the largest of the North American vultures, once ranged throughout much of the West. With their enormous wings condors can stay aloft for hours, soaring on thermal updrafts and barely moving a feather while watching for food.

Many people regard vultures with distaste, thinking of them as dirty, cowardly birds which prey on dying animals. In fact, vultures and condors are exceptionally clean and valuable birds. Feeding almost exclusively on the dead bodies of larger animals such as deer and cows, these birds clear away unsightly corpses, and in so doing they perform a valuable service for animals and man alike, removing potential sources of disease and speeding the recycling of nutrients in the environment.

In recent times the number of condors declined drastically, until by the early eighties only fifteen survived in the rugged mountain wilderness north of Los Angeles. Coastal Indians valued condor feathers for decoration and clothing and may have contributed to the bird's decline, but by far its greatest enemy had been modern man with his way of upsetting the natural chain of life. Like the brown pelican and the peregrine falcon, the condor was severely hit by pesticides such as DDT. It was also vulnerable to thoughtless hunters and to strychnine-laced carcasses left by ranchers to kill coyotes, but its greatest nemesis may have been lead poisoning from ingesting shot and bullet fragments in the remains of game animals.

The remaining condor population dropped precipitously in 1985, and in the face of strong opposition from environmental groups, the decision was made to remove all the birds from the wild; the last free-ranging condor was captured two years later. A breeding program was undertaken at the Los Angeles Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park, and succeeded beyond expectations. Within five years there were fifty-two condors in captivity, and on January 14, 1992 two young birds, Xewe and Chocuyens, were released under close supervision in Los Padres National Forest. The condor's survival as a species now seems assured, but its ability to again thrive in the wild is far less certain: one of the reintroduced birds died of poisoning within the year. Future releases will be in more remote locations, and continue to require careful management.

Color: body, black with white markings on wings; head, red-orange.