



PHOTO BY FRANS LANTING

# THE GHOST OF THE CONDOR

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

*An ugly vulture or magnificently mystical? Whichever, the time clock of this species is rapidly winding down.*

**O**n Monterey Bay in the year 1602, Father Ascension, the chronicler for the Viscaino expedition, dutifully recorded in his journal the sighting of "a flock of giant vultures" eating a dead whale on a beach.

Father Ascension may not have known it or even cared, but he made the first written account of California condors. In doing so he supplied the opening line of the opening chapter of the now well-publicized sad story of North America's biggest bird.

The California condor is a primeval carrion-eating glider whose beginnings date back to the Pleis-

tocene Age when sabre-toothed tigers and giant sloths roamed California. Its nearly 10-foot wingspan and soaring grace earned it deity status among the California Indians who worshipped the giant birds as a sign of immortality.

But the condors weren't immortal. The early agrarian-minded Spanish settlers had little effect on the big bird. Condors had lived off the populous Tule elk herds, marine mammal carcasses, and other forms of dead wildlife. As far as condors were concerned, the Spanish did little more than add cattle to the carcass smorgasbord that they glided over on daily sojourns that

took them from the Sierras to Big Sur. If something died in the rolling grasslands of California, chances are they saw it, and, if it suited them, they ate it. It was their assignment in nature to clean up the remains of dead things.

Then came the Goldrush. All wild animals suffered tremendously under the human onslaught that engulfed the state. The elk, a sure food source for 10,000 years, were shot nearly to the point of extinction. In 1870, just two Tule elk survived. The formerly free-roaming cattle now became tightly managed herds. Condors were har-

pressed to find food and were often shot when they landed to gorge on dead domestic stock. Worse yet, their quills became popular containers for gold dust, making the shooting of condors not only a casual form of target practice, but profitable as well. Then came the collectors looking for eggs and fully developed specimens for museums and private collections. Next, poisoned carcasses intended for coyotes, bear, and mountain lion were eaten instead by condors. All this was followed by egg shell-thinning DDT that decimated many species of large birds ranging from falcons to pelicans.

The condors' low reproductive rate of only one chick every two years, in combination with guns, poisons and changes in availability of food, took its toll. By the turn of the century they had disappeared from their haunts that had stretched from the Northwest to western Texas. About 100 remained in the rugged coastal mountains between Monterey and Los Angeles. In 1960 perhaps 60 still survived.

As recently as 30 years ago the giant vultures occasionally nested in the Los Padres National Forest south of Monterey. Five years ago the birds were still sighted inland from Big Sur riding the thermals all the way up to 15,000 feet before sliding off through the sky at a 90-mile-per-hour clip, covering 1,000 miles or more in a day on a glide back to their last refuge in the mountains near Los Angeles. But not anymore.

To be sure, the picture is very bleak. Today, despite the valiant efforts of scientists, there are only five condors left in the wild and 21 in captivity. Depending on whom you talk to, the last chapter has been written; or, there may still be time to turn things around. Contending viewpoints range from the feeling that humans need not meddle any longer, to the hope that continuing the battle to save condors as long as there are birds capable of reproduction will yield positive results.

The condors' glide towards extinction has not been without human involvement at all levels. There have been angry denunciations and bickering among conservation groups who have broken ranks on how the condor should be managed. And there has been unbridled public sympathy towards the birds' plight. Some feel the failure to mount an intelligent conservation program until the 1980s was a grave mistake. Others feel "nature"

should be allowed to take its course.

On one side of the debate are well-known conservationists like David Brower, who at different times has headed up Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club. His side is vehemently opposed to intervening to save the condor. Instead, they argue "death with dignity" in the wild is preferable to having condors live out their lives as captives of a breeding program designed to bring them back to safe numbers. In the politics of the condor, Brower and like thinking people are "noninterventionists."

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On the other side are "interventionists." They are led by scientists like Noel Snyder, who for years studied the condor in the Sespe Condor Refuge north of Los Angeles. Snyder became convinced captive breeding was the only solution if the species was to survive. Captive breeding has worked to save other species from extinction. He cites the very few nesting pairs (only five) in 1982 and the fact that a successfully hatched chick takes two years to raise, effectively eliminating reproductive birds for two years. Moreover, less than 50 percent of the chicks born in the wild survive the first year. Snyder and like thinking scientists wanted to take condor eggs, incubate them and hand raise the young. They had found that many of the condor eggs were abnormally thinned, making them even more susceptible to problems.

Snyder had tried a similar program with Andean condors in South America and found hand-reared birds could be successfully returned to the wild. He was convincing and was allowed by the California Fish and Game Commission to proceed. But early on in his proposed program, tragedy struck. A live wild

chick was accidentally killed during handling. This set off more wrangling between interventionists and noninterventionists, with the California Fish and Game Commission caught in the middle. After a year of stalemate, Snyder was again allowed to collect eggs for incubation and captive rearing. In the meantime the clock had worked against the birds. More had disappeared.

On the second go around, Snyder's egg snatching program met with great success. Snyder found he could get two live chicks out of a single pair of birds in a year. Snyder: "We call it double clutching. We take an egg, and the condors lay another. Instead of the potential for one live chick in the wild over a two year period, we suddenly had the capability to get four." It wasn't long until Snyder had created a dozen chicks in the period of time the most optimum conditions in the wild would have produced three or four.

Snyder had hoped to manage both a captive and wild population. With both, wild birds could teach the ropes to captive birds. But the plan fell apart when the small wild population suddenly plummeted. Nobody knows for sure why. One bird who barely survived had ingested lead bullets from the carcass of a dead animal. Others suspect malicious shooting has accounted for fewer birds.

Whatever the cause, this oversized vulture, which is called everything from "ugly" to "mystical" and a "senile species whose time has come" has done more to dramatize humankind's relationship with wild creatures than practically any creature in recent memory.

Now the fate of the big birds is entirely in human hands. The only hope lies in the captive breeding group in San Diego and Los Angeles. And, positive results won't be quick in coming. Most of the birds are immature and won't be old enough to breed for four or five years.

Provided there are no more unforeseen turn of events, the breeding group stands a good chance of offering a new beginning for the condor. Other species have dwindled to even fewer and recovered. But ultimately the success of returning birds to the wild as much as 10 or 15 years from now will depend on our willingness to provide a suitable, safe habitat, free of man's indiscretions. With success or failure in saving the condor, we will have failed or succeeded in overcoming our past. ♣