



**ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

**Animal Abstract**

**Element Code:** ABNKA03010

**Data Sensitivity:** Yes

**CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE**

**NAME:** *Gymnogyps californianus*

**COMMON NAME:** California Condor

**SYNONYMS:** *Vultur californianus*

**FAMILY:** Cathartidae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** *Vultur californianus*, Shaw, 1797. Naturalists' Misc. 9. *Gymnogyps californianus*, Shaw. 1978.

**TYPE LOCALITY:** Monterey, California, USA. 1792.

**TYPE SPECIMEN:** Unknown

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** "All California condors alive today are descended from only 14 birds...they can be divided into three distinct groups, or clans, based on their lineage. The birds within each clan are highly inbred, but are less so across clans" (Cohn 1993).

**DESCRIPTION:** They are the largest flying land bird in North America. As adults they have a wingspan of 9.5 feet (3.0 m). Their length is 119.0 cm (47.0 in), width 274 cm (108.0 in). Adult has white wing linings, orange head; immature's wing linings are mottled, head dusky. By fledging their wingspan is over 8 feet (2.4 m) and their weight is between 16 and 20 pounds (7.3-9.0 kg). Soar on flat wings, circling for altitude, then giving one deep wing beat to soar off at great speed in search of large carrion. (Scott 1987).

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** They are the largest flying land bird in North America. Black in overall coloration, adults have white wing linings, orange head; immature's wing linings are mottled, head dusky.

**ILLUSTRATIONS:** Color drawing (Scott 1987: 183)  
Color picture of egg (Baicich 1997: Plate 27)  
Color drawing (Sibley 2000)  
Color photos (Vezo 2002)

**TOTAL RANGE:** In prehistoric times, condors were distributed from Canada to Mexico with isolated populations in NY and FL. Approximately 10,000 years ago, the Pleistocene extinction wiped out many large mammals that condors relied on for food. This loss of large prey naturally reduced their range to the Pacific Coast between British Columbia and Baja

California, however recent decline in populations were human induced; poisoning, intentional shootings, habitat destruction and egg collection are examples.

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** Few sight records in 1880s, from southeast to northwest. Latest date October 3, 1924, one seen north of Williams (Monson and Phillips 1981). Reintroduced to Vermillion Cliffs (December 1996), and Hurricane Cliffs (1998), Arizona.

## **SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS**

**BIOLOGY:** Life span in wild is likely 50 or 60 years. Their nest is situated either at some distance above bottoms of cliffs or on steep slopes presumably providing air space for birds to approach and leave nests. Using thermal updrafts condors are able to soar to 15,000 feet, fly at 50 mph and travel over 100 miles per day while expending little energy. Condors fly extended distances in the spring and summer. Sunning is done mostly first thing in the morning, when the condors warm up with the sun's rising. The black birds capture sunlight and warmth with extended wings turned to the sun. At watering holes, condors are often seen bathing. Preening and grooming the bare skin on their heads are particularly important because of their carrion diet.

**REPRODUCTION:** Condors do not breed until age 6-8 years and are monogamous for life. During the courtship display, the male stands with his wings partly outstretched, head held down, and his neck arched forward as he slowly turns and rocks from side to side. They also engage in neck wrestling as well as tandem courtship flights. The nest is a sheltered cave or hole in a cliff with a sand bottom. The nest site may be re-used or several sites used alternately. Pair formation takes place in late fall or early winter. They produce one five-inch long sub-elliptical egg that sits directly on the sand. The egg is smooth with a glossy surface with very fine elongated pits, and is faintly tinted blue. Both parents incubate the egg for 54-58 days. The nestling is altricial and downy. The down of the first coat is white and the head and neck are bare. The second down is gray and woolly, also extending to head and neck. The nestling slowly feathers between the seventh and the twenty-second week. The chick fledges in six months and is dependent on its parents through the next fall's breeding period. The fledgling flies well at ten months but may rely on parents for feeding until it is over a year old. The pair produces only one chick every other year. If the first egg is lost due to accident or predation, a second egg will be laid ("double-clutching").

**FOOD HABITS:** Scavenger of large wild (elk, pronghorn antelope, deer) and domestic animals (cattle and sheep). Condors use their eyesight to find food, while Turkey vultures use their sense of smell.

**HABITAT:** Condors in Arizona roost and nest in steep terrain with rock outcroppings, cliffs, and caves. In California, condors may be found in lower elevations and typically roost in caves or on ledges but may be found in trees as well. High perches are necessary to create the strong updrafts the bird requires to lift into flight. Open grasslands or savannahs are essential to condors for searching for food.

**ELEVATION:** 2,000 - 6,500 feet (610-1981 m).

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Great Basin Desertscrub and Mohave Desertscrub (Brown, 1982).

**POPULATION TRENDS:** In the late 1970's, the species was reduced to a population of less than 25 birds. The decision was made to bring all of the wild condors into captivity to begin a captive breeding program, the last wild condor was secured in April of 1987. After several years of a successful captive breeding program in Los Angeles and San Diego, the first two condors were reintroduced to a California wild sanctuary in 1992. In 1992, the Recovery Program began releasing condors back into the wild. By the summer of 1998, there were more than 150 condors in existence. In 2001 and 2002 condors in Arizona began breeding but nests were unsuccessful. In 2002, three condor eggs hatched in California but the chicks died before fledging. In August of 2003 the first condor chick in more than 80 years in Arizona appeared. Currently the Arizona chick from 2003 is doing very well, and there are two successful nests in 2004. California has hatched three chicks into the wild this year. There are 45 free-flying condors in Arizona.

## **SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION**

**ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS:** LE (USDI, FWS 1967), Arizona population is listed as a 10(j) Non-essential, Experimental Population (USDI, FWS 1996).

**STATE STATUS:** WSC (AGFD, WSCA in prep)  
[State Endangered AGFD, TNW 1988]

**OTHER STATUS:** Category P, (Diario oficial de la federacion, 1994)  
Group 4 (NNDFW, NESL 2005)

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** Human activities need to be considered. Active threats are, lead poisoning, shooting, coyote predation, and power lines.

**PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:** A Recovery plan was completed in 1974 and revised in 1996. Critical habitat is designated in California. The Arizona population of California condors is listed as a 10(j) Non-essential, Experimental Population.

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:** Currently there is an educational program to help reduce lead exposure in condors.

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP:** BLM - Arizona Strip Office; NPS - Grand Canyon National Park; USFS - Kaibab National Forest (north and south of the Grand Canyon).

**SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION****REFERENCES:**

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#### MAJOR KNOWLEDGEABLE INDIVIDUALS:

Andi S. Rogers - Arizona Game and Fish Department, California Condor Project Coordinator. Flagstaff, Arizona.

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

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