

THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume VIII

November-December 1906

Number 6

Life History of the California Condor. Part I.—Finding a Condor's Nest¹

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

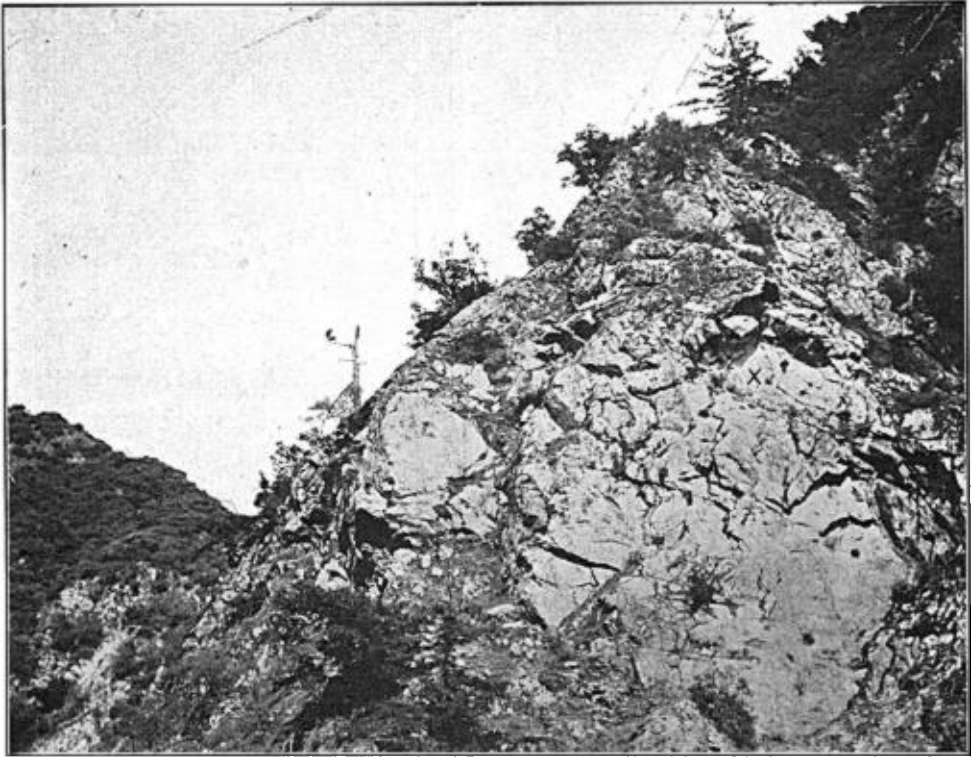
IN October of 1895, a pair of California condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) were seen about one of the canyons of a certain range of mountains in Southern California. A search was made for the home of these birds at the time, but it could not be found. Every year since then, the pair of big birds have been seen about this locality, and many times efforts were made to find the nest, but each time the hunters returned unsuccessful. One year additional evidence was found in the bleached bones and scattered feathers lying in the bed of the canyon. This bird was in all probability the young of that year and was ruthlessly destroyed by the rifle of some wanton wanderer. Last year the pair of old condors and a young bird, hardly able to fly, were seen perched on the limbs of an old dead tree, and the place was marked as this seemed to be definite proof that the home was nearby. But even this apparently definite proof was far from revealing the condor's nest in the rocky crevices and cliffs of the mountain side.

On March 10, 1906, I set out with two companions to make further search for the nest. The most striking feature of this region where the condor lived is the fact that one passes thru the green fields, orchards and vineyards; land that is under the highest cultivation, right up to the beginning of the mountains. At eight o'clock in the morning, we were in the midst of pleasant homes and gardens, and two hours later we seemed to be almost in a different world; it seemed miles out of civilization. We were in the roughest, wildest place without an indication of human habitation. Wild indeed, because this was the natural haunt of the California condor. The contrast is striking, for when we at last reached the knife-edge of one of the ridges, which broke abruptly off a hundred feet on one side and about three hundred on the other to the bed of the gulch, we had a view out the

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mouth of the canyon to the spread-out green fields of the settled region just beyond the border of this rocky fastness.

These mountains are different from those where our work has led us before. From a distance they are deceiving, and one does not get the faintest conception of what they are or what they contain. They seem to be covered with only a scrubby growth, but in reality the canyons are heavily wooded. There is hardly an indication of the canyons and gorges from the outside, but once you enter, you are surrounded by the rock walls that stretch up for hundreds of feet. From the bed of the canyon one can see little and get little idea of where he is going. In many places, the water cuts thru the narrow gorge of rock and falls into deep pools be-



GENERAL VIEW SHOWING LOCATION OF THE CONDOR'S NEST. THIS WAS SITUATED IN SMALL CAVE BEHIND ROCK ABOVE THE MARK X. OLD CONDOR IS SEEN JUST ALIGHTING ON DEAD TREE. PHOTO TAKEN FROM OPPOSITE SIDE OF CANYON FROM NESTING SITE

yond which one cannot go except by scaling the mountain side far above. From the trail three hundred feet above the rocky, boiling stream, we got the best idea of the mountains. In places, the canyon forms a complete S, with the middle of the S but a short distance from the end of the letter but several hundred feet lower down. It looked as if Nature was in a mighty upheaval when these mountains were formed; for the rock has been piled up for a thousand feet, and for ages past the elements have done their best to cut into, crumble and level these huge masses of stone.

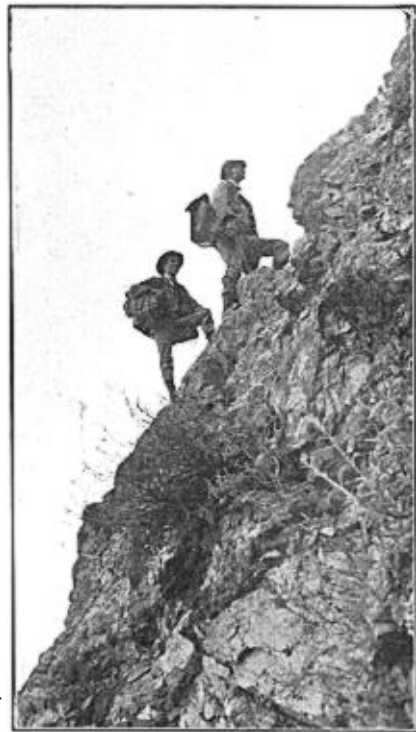
Following the trail for several miles along the canyon we came to the place where the great birds were last seen. From this point, we had a splendid lookout up and down the ravine. For some time we watched and scanned the mountain

sides with our field-glass, but saw no signs of condors. Then the rest of the party went back on the trail a way and clambered down to the creek along which they ascended to a pocket in the side of the cliff opposite, that seemed to be climbable. They investigated several likely-looking places. On up the steep side they climbed till several hundred feet above the bed of the stream, while I kept vigil with the glasses. After hunting for an hour, no trace of condors could be found. Then, while we were all in good position to watch, according to agreement, I fired three shots from my revolver to see if the bird could be scared from the nest which we were sure was somewhere in the locality. A few moments later, we all caught sight of a condor just alighting on a ridge quite a way up the canyon; we all saw her, but no one knew from which direction she came. I watched her for half an hour thru the glasses as she preened her feathers and stretched. This looked encouraging, as the actions were those of a sitting bird. Then suddenly, she took wing and sailed up the gorge out of sight. Thinking she had started for her nest, I hurried back down the mountain side, scrambling over boulders, sliding, and hanging to bushes, till I reached the creek, and then worked on up for half a mile till my progress was stopped by a water-fall cutting down thru two walls of rock. In the meantime my companions from their side had watched the condor as she flew over and lighted on a high cliff, then back to her former perch, and up the canyon again to the old tree on the cliff side where the young bird was seen last year. From their outlook up the mountain side, they saw her jump down to a lower perch, where she was hidden from view. After waiting half an hour, since she did not appear again, they descended the steep slope and we ate a hurried lunch and planned a further search.

We all knew just about where the old condor had disappeared, but the steep side of the mountain was rough and impassable in places. Further search revealed nothing along the ledges and among the boulders. But we still had the last and surest resort, the sound of the old pistol, that roared like a battery of cannons as the echoes reverberated from cliff to cliff.

Climbing up the opposite slope to a ledge across from where the old bird disappeared, I had a complete survey of the place where the nest was supposed to be. Both sides of the gorge were steep and not too far apart for us to yell back and forth, but for all our calling no condor appeared.

Finally, three more shots were fired a few seconds apart, and after the third, the old condor suddenly appeared on a rock only twenty feet above the head of one of my companions. The hunter instinctively crawled behind a tree as the big bird sat there looking as if she were about to pitch into the intruder, who was yelling like mad at finding the nest. I myself was making the canyon resound with whoops



FINLEY AND BOHLMAN ON THEIR WAY TO THE CONDOR'S NEST, GIVING AN IDEA OF THE ROUGHNESS OF THE COUNTRY

as I saw the old condor with her feathers ruffled, sitting at the mouth of her cave, and watched the whole performance thru my fieldglass.

Down the mountain I went in haste that was dangerous and might have resulted in disaster had I not caught in some bushes. At the bottom I met the third member of the party, who was as excited as myself. When we reached the tree below the nest, we still found the condor watching her human visitor, who was looking out from behind the tree. But at the sight of two more men, with one or two huge wing-sweeps, she jumped over to the perch on the tree-top thirty feet away,



THE OLD CONDOR ON ONE OF HIS FAVORITE PERCHES. PHOTO TAKEN WHILE BIRD WAS YAWNING

and then after watching us a few minutes, silently and sullenly spread her wings and sailed down the canyon.

We climbed to the rock above and found it was a huge boulder set well into the mountain. Against this was leaning a big stone slab about ten feet high. This left a space about two by six feet and open at each end. This cave was lined with leaves and fine rock and in the middle was one big egg. We thought it was not far from hatching by its glossy surface and the tenacity with which the mother stayed on her nest.

It seemed to be the sound of the pistol that the condor feared, for that alone had made her leave her home. Twice one of the boys crossed above the nest, and we had been yelling back and forth, but she had paid no attention to that.

Even in California where the sun is supposed to shine one gets a rainy spell that will knock out all his calculations for taking bird pictures. And a period of dark, rainy weather

is likely to come at the very time it is not wanted. Regardless of the foggy, cloudy weather, we set out one morning about a week later. When we reached the foot of the hills, the fog was thicker than ever and had turned into a drizzling rain. But we shouldered our two cameras, blankets and other equipment that we had taken with the expectation of making a two days' trip.

When we came to the brink of the canyon and descended a hundred feet along a steep trail thru the brush, worn out partly by the pouring waters of the recent rain, instead of an almost dry creek-bed that we had found on the first trip, we now had to wade and jump from rock to rock to cross the swift current.

By this time it had begun to rain in earnest; so we stopped and built a fire and ate lunch, hoping it would clear off so we could continue. We waited for two hours, but there was no change in the weather except for the worse, so we gathered our traps and set out for home thirty-five miles away.

The weather continued stormy and our next trip to the condor's nest was postponed till March 23. A heavy sea-fog hung low over the country, but we had hopes that there was blue sky beyond. As we went on the fog did not clear, and we seemed likely to have a day similar to our last trip. We finally stowed away part of our equipment in the brush and with one camera and some lunch, started up the creek, which was still high.

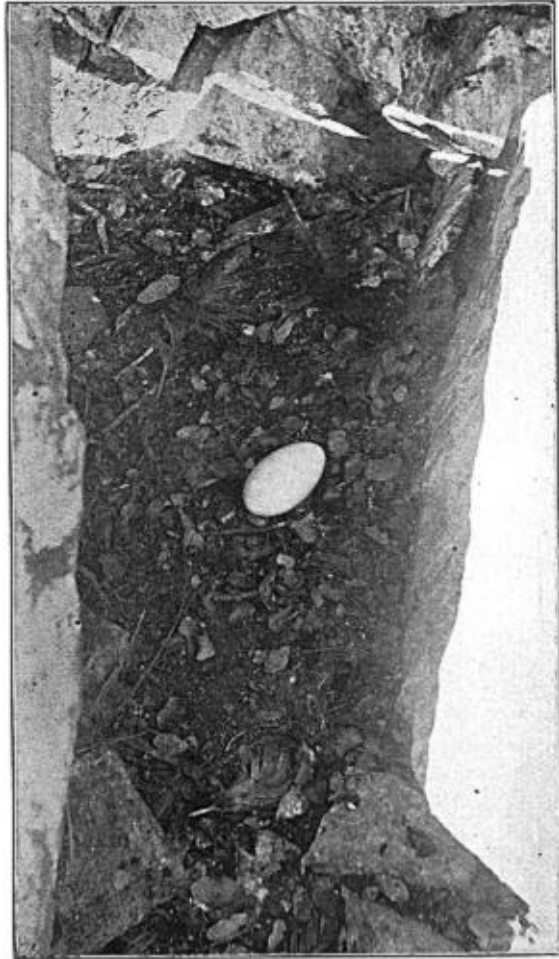
The last two storms had carried down great masses of rock and shale from the steep slopes and washed out the trail in some places. In another place a boulder weighing a ton blocked the path. When we reached the steep ascent up the side of the mountain, the trail was almost obliterated, but just enough was left to follow. It took an hour to reach the top of the ridge.

Following the trail that skirted the mountain side, we reached a place several hundred yards down the canyon from the nest, and then descended to the stream which we crossed several times before reaching the spot below the nest. Here it began to rain and we stopped under a tree for lunch.

At one o'clock it still rained and the trees and bushes were wet. But we were too near the big nest not to try a few pictures even in the rain. Strapping the camera firmly to my back, we began the steep ascent of fifty yards to the cave.

Hanging to the roots and bushes and edging from side to side up the rocky surface, we both reached the pocket containing the nest.

When we climbed over where we could look between the rocks and see into the cave, the old bird was on. I went closer and could see her bald head of orange color, and the great black bird still sat on the nest. I climbed up within four feet of her and whistled and yelled till she rose on her feet. She looked so big that I



NEST AND EGG OF CALIFORNIA CONDOR. SHOWS MATERIAL COM-
POSING FLOOR OF NEST-CAVE. PHOTO TAKEN FROM LEDGE
OVERHEAD, AND LOOKING DIRECTLY DOWN INTO NEST

shrank back at the thought of her pitching in to defend her young, for when she rose, I glanced in and saw a youngster not larger than the egg. His head was bald like his mother's, but baldness did not signify age in this case, altho his head was fleshy-pink in color. He was weak for he could hardly kick, and he



EGG OF CALIFORNIA CONDOR. PHOTO TAKEN IN NEST

seemed to raise his head with difficulty as he cried out in a wheezing, hissing note. Beside him lay the end of the egg from which he had emerged not many hours before. He was not yet dry. He was not even well clothed, for behind his little

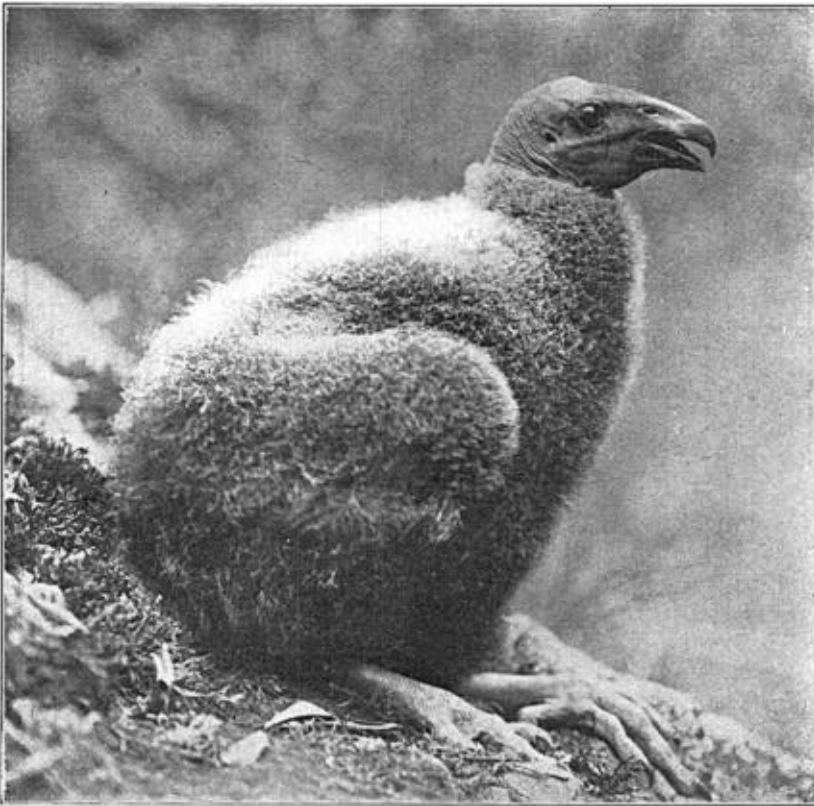


CONDOR CHICK PHOTOGRAPHED MARCH 23, 1906. THE NEXT DAY AFTER HATCHING. WHITE DOWN STILL DAMP. HEAD, NECK AND FEET WERE FLESH-COLOR OR PINKISH. WEIGHT LESS THAN ONE POUND

wings, the flesh was bare and his belly was bare, while the rest of his coat was down of pure white.

At first the mother arose and her neck feathers ruffled up in anger. Then as her baby began to squirm, she put her head down and covered him partly with her

bare neck. Then it was evident we could not scare her from her den. But we had to have a picture of this baby bird, the nestling of the largest bird that flies, and one that is so rare in the ornithological world. Crawling over closer where I could look thru the crevice in the rock, I got down within three feet of the mother as she sat hovering her chick. I could almost touch the white on her shoulder and plainly see the blood-red eyes that watched me, and the edging of white on her wing feathers. But she sat still till I reached in with a short stick, when she drew back as if to strike, but I had the advantage of her, for I knew that in that narrow place the big bird was almost helpless. When she arose and stepped back, I gently rolled



THE YOUNG CONDOR AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-FOUR DAYS. PHOTO TAKEN MAY 15, 1906. NO FEATHERS SHOWING YET. WEIGHT ABOUT SEVEN POUNDS

the chick over nearer to me and reached in and took him in my hand. The mother sat in sullen silence.

We immediately set up the camera in the pelting rain and focused it on a sheltered spot just outside the den of the old bird, then placing the chick on the ground took a snap of him. Covering him quickly so as to keep him warm, we tried four more exposures in about the same position. But the darkness of the weather made a slow exposure necessary and the youngster wiggled most of the time. But by that time it suddenly dawned on us that he was getting chilled and I hastily put him back in the nest.

But to my chagrin, the old bird just sat with her head down and paid no atten-

tion to the chick under her nose, who had now grown too weak to even squirm. He seemed nothing more to her than the shell by her side. I knew the chick would die if he were not warmed immediately, so I climbed around to the front door of the cave and tried to make the mother move over and hover her nestling. This would not work so I reached in and got the youngster again and he was chilled thru, and with our cold hands we could give him little warmth. As a last remedy we held him close in to our warm bodies, and after a little while, he began to squirm again as the warmth seemed to revive him.

At that instant, I looked up and saw the male condor soaring above and dropping lower and lower. My heart sank for a moment as I felt like crouching down and crawling under cover. But reaching for my tripod as a weapon of defence, I stood

there while the big bird swung around only a few yards above our heads and lit on the perch of the dead pine about forty feet away. He sat there with wings out-stretched and watching us closely. It made us crouch closer behind the bushes to have a bird of such size so near above and threatening to pounce upon us at any moment. But we soon saw that he had no intention of fighting.

All the time we were in great doubt as to whether the mother would accept her chick again if he were revived. She sat there all the while with her head down watching thru the crevice. As soon as the young bird revived so he could kick about, I crawled down near the nest and thrust my arm clear in till I almost touched her nose and put the chick down before her. Then I slid back down the rock. It was a moment of intense anxiety for me; if she did not take the chick to her, it meant his death as well as an end to all our dreams of getting a life series of pictures of this



OLD CONDOR ON TREE-PERCH NEAR NEST. FEATHERS RUFFLED UP ABOUT NECK IN USUAL ATTITUDE

rare bird. For an instant she paid no attention to him, but just then he began to stir and wriggle. Her eyes changed from their vacant stare: she suddenly seemed to recognize her nestling, and putting her bill down she drew him gently near, crouching down at the same time and finally drawing him under her breast. We felt very much relieved at this and hurriedly taking our camera, we started back down the mountain leaving the pair of big birds and their nestling.

The rain had continued till everything was soaked. Wading thru the brush, we were soon wet thru and then after the climb up to the trail again, we had the worst part to traverse, for the path was thru the high bushes, each of which held a shower of drops. But we had five plates any one of which, if it were good, would pay for a thirty-five mile trip into the mountains, and better still we had the hope of getting more in the future.

Portland, Oregon.