THE CONDOR

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF
WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY
Published by the
COOPER ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

VOLUME XXXIV | JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1932 | NUMBER 1

A QUEST FOR A CONDOR

By BAYARD H. CHRISTY

I wished to see a Condor. An easterner, about to go on a visit to California, I took counsel, and a Los Angeles friend, who besides being a good field ornithologist is a skilled aviator, proposed that we fly for Condors: he too wished to see Condors, to find some spot frequented by them, and having found it to return to it on the ground and to take motion pictures. It was a generous proposal and hospitable, and adventurous as well, all in the best western tradition; furthermore, it was a proposal in which lay a certain suitability; it seemed fitting that, on his newly found wings, a man should match himself against the incomparable aviator of the mountains.

And fly we did. We climbed the heights, we whirred along bumpy crests, we swung across giddy precipices; we looked down upon miles and miles of steep-walled cañons and wedge-shaped ridges, rugged, scantily forested, gray and green below, pink and lavender afar: an inaccessible land, yet alluring; hellish, yet beautiful. High in the air, a great hawk flapped as we rushed by; but not a Condor did we see: no great body perched upon a crag; no wide-spread set of wings. It was a thrilling, and, to a novice, a somewhat alarming adventure, but, as for the object of search, it was quite fruitless. Where were the Condors? This was their homeland; here was their fastness; but where were they? Gone to some far feeding-ground? roosting undisturbed in the crevices of the rocks? or sailing high in the empyrean above? One surmise seemed as good as another.

My friend wished to try again another day, but my time was brief, and I was eager now to come afoot within the confines of Condor-land, that I might at least gain more intimate knowledge of their habitat, and, perhaps, by good fortune, come upon some of the birds themselves. An early morning, then, found me, in company with a well-informed ranchman, mounting a trail through one of the very cañons over which a few days before I had flown. It was a deep and winding chasm; a clear river poured down a rock-strewn bed, and rested in frequent green-fringed pools. The river nurtured a strip of shadowy forest, and high on either hand rose vast cliffs of red sandstone, with such variety of broad walls, clean-cut buttresses, and slender spires, such range of color, from pale hematite red, to distant rose and lilac, as to astound and delight a stranger. Here in the forest, on a sycamore bough which overhung the trail, a hummingbird had shaped her cup of down; there on the red cliff a patch of white spreading from a high ledge marked the eyrie of some

great bird of prey. In the dust of the trail were deer-prints; plume-tailed ground squirrels scampered to cover; as the heat of the day increased, lizards scurried in the dry and rocky places; yellow and black-laced butterflies floated in the shadows; tawny dragonflies darted in the sunlight.

After following the trail far beyond even the fishermen's camps, and while the morning still was young, we reached a narrow bench where stood the derricks of a now abandoned oil-working. Here the cañon widened and the walls receded to distant heights. My guide declared we could do no better than rest at this point and wait, in the hope that the great birds we were searching for would now themselves appear. We settled ourselves, therefore, comfortably upon the table-like face of an upturned spool for oil-well cable. Behind us the ground fell steeply to the stream a hundred feet below; before us rose an arid slope, rough with scattered boulders, tangles of greasewood, and the juiceless, barbed fruitage of the desert; a half-mile beyond stood the great precipice, rosy in the sunlight; a parapet of square-cornered rock masses towered sharp against the sky. The susurrus of the rushing stream filled our ears endlessly; the light airs carried a faint fragrance of sage.

We searched our surroundings near and far: by squeaking we called up, in the thickets about us, Wren-tits, Goldfinches, a Gnatcatcher, a Black-headed Grosbeak, a San Diego Wren; far away a Golden Eagle swung into the cañon and perched on an outstanding crag; a Cooper Hawk rose, turned high in air, and was off; a pair of Band-tailed Pigeons hurried by.

My companion had knowledge of the precipice; he pointed out a high ledge where Prairie Falcons nested, and told me of seeing these fierce birds dash out to drive away a passing Condor; and, after we had waited for a fruitless hour, he proposed that we climb and reconnoiter. We mounted to a higher bench and again settled ourselves on a great boulder, whence we could survey the precipice to its very base, and at once we discovered the Condors.

A large spruce tree, blasted and half dead, rose at the base of the cliff, and, perched upon its bare limbs, were two of the great birds. One stood with wings extended, in the posture of an eagle on a coin, facing the sun; the other was craning his coral-orange head anxiously, disturbed, manifestly, even by our distant approach. Presently he was off. With deliberate and consummate ease he launched himself, flapped with slow wing-beats, and, gaining headway, swung on full-set pinions across the face of the rock. An astonishing spectacle! The wide, black wings with patches of white beneath, inclined slightly upward and reaching noticeably forward; the bright orange head; the great form, adequate to the mighty mountain scene; a display of unmeasured power and perfect grace! Here was the flier for the mountain spaces: the hummingbird for the sycamore's shade, but, for the crags, the Condor!

Our bird rose to a perch at the brink of the precipice and, as he passed their ledge, out sprang the falcons. Though they made no attack, they manifestly were perturbed; they did not like the intrusion. With their pointed wings, and of inappreciably lesser size, I should not have known them from peregrines. Again the Condor flew; and this time, swinging through a wider arc, he rose above the cañon wall, and came, breasting the wind, in seeming slow but sure and level progress, until, having passed the place where his mate was perched, he turned away and disappeared. Half an hour later he returned, perched on the parapet, and at length sailed grandly above us to the opposite side of the cañon.

Meanwhile his mate remained on the perch where we had discovered her. My guide spoke with authority, and averred that the sexes are identical in appearance; and yet I believed myself justified in my distinction between them. Both were adult

birds. Their perching tree was much frequented; its limbs gleamed, polished by wear. Somewhere in that great cliff was their nesting place; even yet, in mid-September, their single nestling might be still continuing in his natal cave, unfledged. Assuming them to be a nesting pair, it was fair to infer that the warier bird was the male; and that it was the female which continued more courageously on guard.

Major Allan Brooks's pen drawing of a Condor in flight, in Mr. Ralph Hoffmann's "Birds of the Pacific States," seems to me to be as adequate as a drawing could be, with one possible qualification: the bird as I observed it flew as a crane flies, with neck outstretched, not retracted, as Major Brooks shows it to be. Perhaps, however, different postures are assumed under different circumstances.

Of the habits of Condors not a great deal seems to be known. Their rarity, the inaccessibility of their haunts, the wideness of their range individually, beyond the power of the observer to follow, all tend to maintain the mystery which surrounds them. Though I do not know, I surmise that, when we swept overhead in the aeroplane, these Condors were there, perched where the ranchman and I afterward found them. And, if that be so, the aeroplane may, after all, be found to be of little avail to aid in dispelling the mystery.

Sewickley, Pennsylvania, September 17, 1931.