

# Status of the California Condor, 1972 - 1975

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From 1966 to 1971, the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) population was estimated to include 50 to 60 birds. Production averaged only two young per year, and further decline seemed imminent (Wilbur *et al.*, *American Birds* 26:819-823, 1972). This report summarizes population information collected since 1971.

Survey techniques that show positively the number of remaining condors have not yet been perfected. Estimates are based on various partial counts, and on other reports from cooperators. As in the past, reports received from all sources are transferred to a keysort card system, and later analyzed by date, location, time of day, number of birds present, and age ratios. Results can be reported in terms of seasonal and spatial distribution, highest single counts, highest composite counts (combinations of counts probably representing different birds), and number of immature-plumaged birds (under five years of age).

From 1972 through 1975, approximately 500 individual condor sightings were received and analyzed.

**Distribution.** No detectable change in either seasonal or spatial distribution has occurred since 1966, and probably none has occurred since the 1930s or earlier. The majority of condors occupy the southern and eastern segments of the species' wishbone-shaped range (Figure 1). Only a few (probably fewer than ten) inhabit the Coast Ranges. Occasional reports from the San Bernardino Mountains suggest that a few may still be living there. Recent rumors of condors in Baja California, Mexico, still have not been confirmed.

Extremely low counts the past several years are alarming, but as there are a number of factors that could influence condor flocking habits, it would be premature to suggest a major decline since 1970. Nevertheless, I think it is certain that there are not more than 50 condors remaining.

All known nesting since 1971 has occurred in Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles counties

**Numbers.** Although difficult to document, it appears that condor numbers have decreased since 1970. Whereas groups of more than 20 condors were regularly sighted in the years before 1971 (Wilbur *et al.*, *op. cit.*), only one group of over 20 condors has been reported during the past five years. The largest flocks observed in 1973, 1974 and 1975 contained 13, 12 and 9 birds (Table 1).

"Composite counts" are also down; the highest since 1972 was less than 20 (Table 1). Counts of 34, 27 and 26, and a probable count of 38, were recorded in 1968-1970.

**Table 1**  
Highest Positive Counts of Condors, 1972-1975

Date	Number	Location	Observers
Sept. 2, 1972	24	Glennville, Kern Co.	E. Farnsworth G. Carpenter
	1	Cuyama Peak, Sta. Barb. Co.	
Oct. 11, 1972	18	Tejon Ranch,	K. Axelson
Oct. 25, 1973	13	Tejon Ranch, Kern Co.	J. Borneman, E. McMillan
	5	Tejon Ranch	W. Carrier, K. Axelson
	1	Hopper Mt., Ventura Co.	M. Montagne, D. Warren
Oct. 17, 1974	12	Tejon Ranch	L. Kiff, E. Harrison, R. Quigley
	2	Tejon Ranch	J. Tarble, G. Nixon
	3	Santiago Canyon, Kern Co.	R. Fordice, R. Buss
	2	Agua Blanca, Ventura Co.	R. Long, J. Blake
	9	Springville, Tulare Co.	J. Miller
July 7, 1975	9	Springville, Tulare Co.	J. Miller
	2	Gold Hill, Ventura, Co.	M. Giorgis
Sept. 27, 1975	9	Tejon Ranch	J. Borneman

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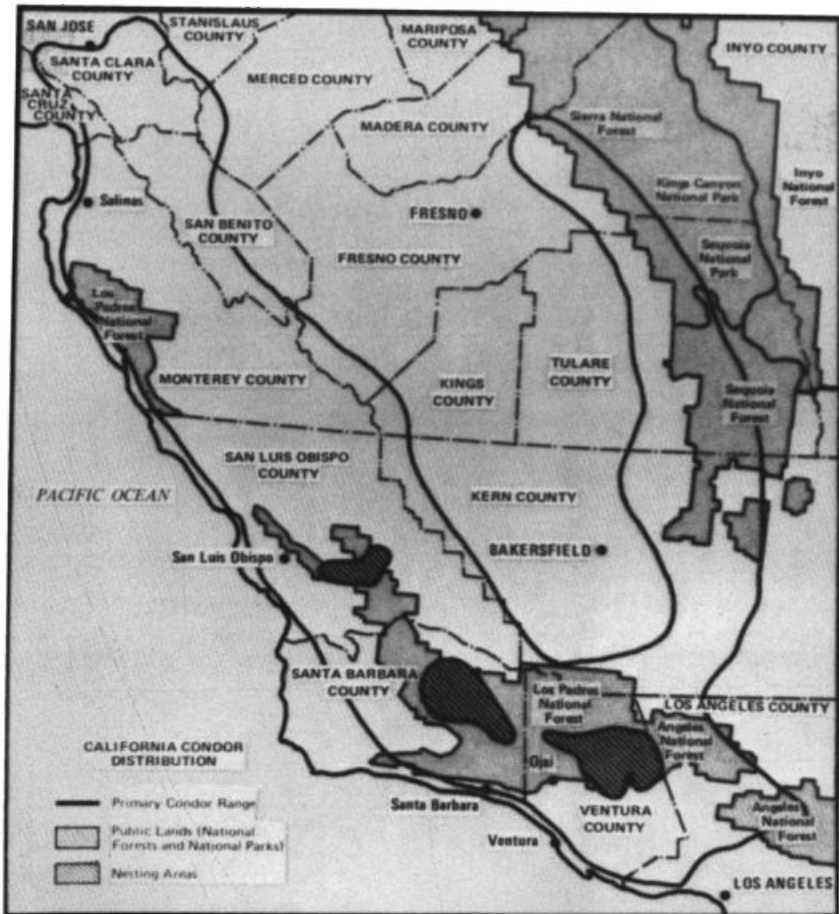


Figure 1. Distribution of the California Condor.

**Mortality and Natalty.** Production continues well below desirable levels, with not more than six young fledged in 1972-1975, an average of fewer than two young per year. To maintain the population, annual rearing of about four young is needed. Low production is the result of failure of pairs to breed, rather than loss of eggs or chicks.

Only one condor, a 2- to 3-year-old bird found in Kern County in 1974 (cause of death undetermined), is known to have died in the past four years. Two others are rumored to have died in San Luis Obispo County in 1972, and decreased observations of condors in that area seem to confirm the rumors. Apparently other deaths have also occurred. No particular mortality factors seem operative, and it may merely be that natural losses from old age have exceeded production during this period.

Population estimates of fewer than 50 condors have been published in the past, but these certainly resulted from incomplete sampling (see Wilbur *et al.*, *op. cit.*, for a discussion of this). I think that the current population of California Condors is the

smallest that has ever existed to our knowledge, and that production is lower than ever before. Although it is too early to give up hope for the species, a continuation of trends evident the past ten years could soon put the population beyond help. Everything we are going to do to preserve the California Condor must be done quickly if it is to be of value.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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