

The California Condor in Baja California, Mexico

Are there any condors still living in this vast wild area? A current assessment.

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IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) occurred in western North America from southern British Columbia, Canada, to northern Baja California, Mexico (Koford 1953, Wilbur 1973). By 1940 it seemed to be restricted to the State of California between 34° and 37° N., roughly from Los Angeles to Santa Clara counties. Koford (1953) knew of no condor records for Baja California after 1937.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of travelers in Baja California reported seeing or hearing about large birds that might have been condors. Most were from areas formerly occupied by condors, raising hopes that there might still be a resident population outside the United States. To clarify the situation, we checked as many of the reports as we could, and also participated in five trips into Baja California to search for condors. Because almost all accepted reports of California Condors in Baja California were from the Sierra San Pedro Martir (Fig. 1 and Appendix), we concentrated our efforts there. We made three trips to the summit plateau area (May 15-20, 1972, LFK; May 2-5, 1975, LFK-SRW; August 3-11, 1977, LFK-SRW) and one to the canyons at the base of the eastern escarpment (November 25-28, 1971, LFK). A reconnaissance trip was made to the Sierra Juarez April 26-30, 1979 (SRW) to see if habitat suitable for condors exists there.

No condors were seen by us, and we were unable to find adequate support for reports by others. None of the reports checked by us met what we consider to be basic requirements for such a record to be accepted: (1) that they were

seen by an observer who had seen condors previously, (2) that the observer was thoroughly familiar with other large soaring birds that might be seen in Baja California, (3) that a recognizable photograph of the bird was available, or (4) that the bird was seen long enough or well enough that the observer could give a detailed description of it.

IT MIGHT BE THOUGHT that a bird with a 9-foot wingspan could not be mistaken for anything else. On the contrary, in our more than 10 years of observing both condors and condor-watchers, we have found that even moderately-experienced observers can be deceived (at least momentarily). Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), with their large size, flat soaring plane, and (in immature birds) white wing patches, can be especially confusing, but so can Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) and even large hawks. Seldom does one see a condor close enough to distinguish the yellow-orange head, white wing linings, and finger-like primary feathers. In fact, most recent reports from Baja California are no more specific than that the bird in question was extremely large, dark, and soared very steadily. None that have come to our attention give an irrefutable description of a California Condor.

Other ornithologists working in Baja California since 1940 have failed to report condors. For example, Hill and Wiggins (1948) travelled through the Sierra Juarez, Sierra San Pedro Martir, and connecting lowlands October 3-21, 1946, recording all birds seen, but specifically gathering information on the condor. They had no success. In the summer of 1949, Koford (1953) was unable to locate condors in the Sierra San Pedro

Martir. Short and Banks (1965) made detailed observations of all birds in the foothills of the Sierra San Pedro Martir April 20-29, 1964, and Short and Crossin (1967) spent most of April 1967 in the hill country east and south of Ensenada. Again, no evidence of condors was found.

Condors found in Baja California after 1910 were probably members of an isolated resident population. Since condors had disappeared from adjacent parts of California by then, it is unlikely that non-resident birds were wandering several hundred miles to that area when there was much more hospitable habitat closer to home. Although there are no certain breeding records, condors probably nested in the coastal mountains near Ensenada (Appendix). With summer records from the high mountains, and two of the three definite winter records from the lowland areas, an annual cycle very similar to that of the current California population (Wilbur 1978) is suggested; *i.e.*, while some condors were nesting in the lower coastal mountains, the nonbreeding birds moved to summer feeding and roosting areas at higher elevations. In winter, they moved back to the lowlands to a less rigorous climate where food was likely to be more available. Such a resident population with no recruitment from outside the area would have been seriously affected by food shortages resulting from reductions in both native and domestic ungulates following overgrazing in the 1920s (L. Huey field notes, Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology) and a long-term drought in the 1930s (Scott 1936, Koford 1953). During that same time period there was apparently considerable mortality from shooting (Scott 1936). Sev-

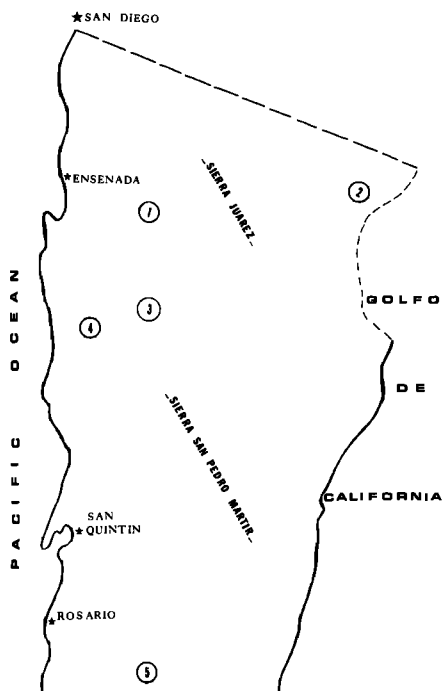


Figure 1. Northern Baja California, Mexico, showing locations of California Condor reports. 1, Valle San Rafael; 2, Sierra de los Cocopah; 3, San Pablo Peak; 4, Guadalupe Valley; and 5, San Fernando.

eral local populations of condors in the United States became extinct from comparable pressures during the Nineteenth Century (Wilbur 1973).

WE CANNOT POSITIVELY SAY that there have been no California Condors in Baja California in recent years, but we think it is doubtful for the following reasons.

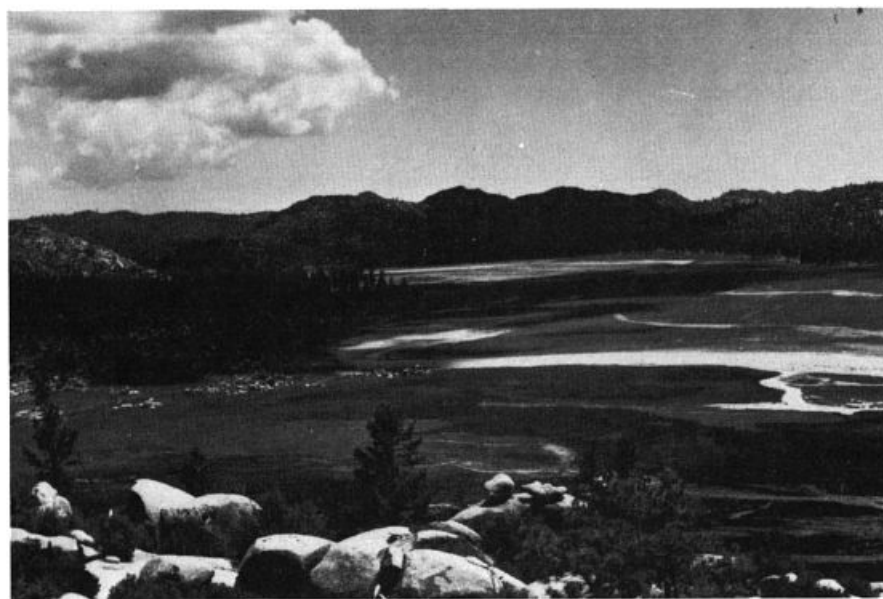


Figure 2. La Encantada, Sierra San Pedro Martir, site of many of the Baja California condor records.

1. There is very little suitable habitat.—Although there are thousands of square miles of relatively uninhabited terrain in northern Baja California, much of it is desert. The region has never fully recovered from the drought of the 1930s. Native mammals are scarce, and livestock grazing is localized. Condors, particularly nesting birds not free to forage great distances, would have great difficulty finding food regularly.

There is no other area in Baja California comparable to the Sierra San Pedro Martir, the location of most historical condor sightings. The Sierra Juarez, for example, lacks the high mountain meadows with seasonally large numbers of cattle. The coastal mountains have potential nesting sites, but little food.

2. There is little likelihood of vagrant birds coming from California.—Very few California Condors have been reported south of Los Angeles since 1910 (Koford 1953). There are no confirmed records since before 1966 (Wilbur 1978). While a condor has the capability of soaring great distances, and they do sometimes appear in unexpected places, in general they are traditional and predictable in their movements. For a California bird to appear in Baja California would require a minimum flight of more than 300 miles, in a non-traditional direction, and over considerable terrain that we think would have little or no attraction for a condor.

3. Resident birds would have been seen.—As mentioned above, there are

very few places in Baja California that we think are suitable for condors. Those places have been visited regularly by us and other ornithologists. A population that has sustained itself without outside recruitment since before 1940 (the last published dates of occurrence) would have had to consist of more than a few individuals. Lone birds or pairs might have gone undetected, but groups should have been seen.

We encourage ornithologists visiting Baja California to keep looking for condors, particularly when in the Sierra San Pedro Martir, the Sierra Juarez, or in the coastal mountains between Ensenada and San Quintin. However, we do not expect you to find any. In the unlikely event that California Condors do exist in Baja California, they must be in even more precarious straits than the remnant population north of the border.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our activities in Baja California were funded jointly by the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We are especially grateful to "Chuck" Vernon for introducing us to the wild wonders of the Sierra San Pedro Martir. Others who participated in the study were: Keith Axelson (2 trips), John Borneman (2), Bill Clifton, Deborah Davis, John Helms, Tom Howell, Tom Howell Jr., Shirley Imsand (2), Antonio Landazuri, Eben McMillan (3), Greg McMillan, Linda McMillan, John Moss, Glenn Olson, Richard Philibosian (2), John Schmitt, David Siddon, and Ron Walker.

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Figure 3. La Grulla, Sierra San Pedro Martir, base camp for most biological expeditions into the mountains of Baja California, and an area used regularly by condors prior to 1940.

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APPENDIX

Reports of California Condors in Baja California.

The following records are principally from observers familiar with condors, or who were in Baja California specifically to make observations of the fauna. Less definite reports that have been cited previously or that provide additional interesting information are also included.

- 1879— An uncle of E. A. McIlhenny reportedly took four California Condor eggs from northwestern Mexico. Letters from McIlhenny to W. L. Chambers in September and October 1902 (in Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley) state that the eggs were end blown and had the date and locality of collection written on them. The McIlhenny Collection is now at Louisiana State University, but neither condor eggs nor collection data have been located in it.
- 1880s— Anthony (1893) reported that his brother W. W. Anthony saw condors near Real de Castillo, Valle de San Rafael.
- 1884— Col. N. S. Goss told Belding (1890) that one or more pairs of condors bred near Crosswaith's Ranch about 60 miles south of San Diego, California. Goss was in that area in late March 1884, but it is not known if he actually saw the birds or their nests. Abbott (1933) described the ranch of Albert Crosthwaite as being 30 miles south of the International Border.
- 1887— Anthony (1893) reported finding a dead condor in Guadalupe Valley, 40 miles south of Ensenada near the coast; no date is given here for this record, which

was his "first evidence" of condors in Baja California, but Taylor (1895) quotes him as saying that it was in 1887. According to Anthony's own publications (1893, 1895), he was in Baja California in (at least) April, May, June, and October 1887; as the next specimen was found "later", this one was probably seen in the spring.

- 1887— Anthony (1895) found a "recently killed" condor about 20 miles north of San Fernando, at about 30° N. The natives said this occurrence was very unusual. Judging from Anthony's known itinerary, this probably occurred in early summer or in October.
- 1893— Anthony (1893) reported that condors were seen daily (as many as 3 at once, Taylor 1895) on the Sierra Pedro Martir meadows. This presumably referred to his May 1893 visit, but he was also in the Sierra San Pedro Martir in May 1887, October 1887, and April-May 1889.
- 1905— S. N. Rhoads reported seeing one condor at the east base of the Cocopah Mountains in February (Stone 1905). This is an unusual desert location for a condor, but there are a number of possibly valid Arizona records from about this period (Phillips *et al.*, 1964), and it is only 60 km from the Sierra Juarez.
- 1905— In July, condors were "rather common" in the Sierra San Pedro Martir (Goldman 1951). One subadult was collected at La Grulla July 22 (U. S. Nat. Mus. #203218), and an adult female USNM 203219) and an



Figure 4. Valle de Ojos Negros from the western slopes of the Sierra Juarez. More intensified agriculture in the larger valleys of northern Baja California has replaced open rangeland where condors once foraged.

immature (USNM 203217) were collected in the Santa Rosa Valley on July 26. Nelson (1911) reported that they watched a dozen or more condors in flight, and also (Nelson 1921) that the carcass of a donkey attracted about a dozen condors. They were told that condors nested in Santa Rosa Canyon, but they saw no evidence of this.

- 1906— North (1910) reported seeing one condor in the Sierra San Pedro Martir; he was in the mountains in July (North 1907).
- 1907— On December 1 an adult female was collected on the “coast of Lower California”, by or for M. Abbott Frazer; this specimen is in the collection of Virginia Polytechnic Institute, acquired from the A. H. Helme Collection. Another specimen, now at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (Los Angeles), was also from the “coast of Lower California” and is also from the Helme Collection, so was probably collected in 1907 also.
- 1909— Or possibly 1919 (data slip entry obscure), a condor egg was reportedly taken from San Pablo Peak on March 15 (Swann 1924). This egg has apparently been lost, and Koford (1953) thought that the record might have been falsified, but the recent finding of the original data slip at the San Bernardino Museum of Natural History (by LFK) adds credibility to the record. There is a San Pablo Peak at approximately 31°30' N, the same general locality where Anthony (1893) found a dead condor in 1887.
- 1915— Local residents of the Sierra San Pedro Martir re-

ported to Scott (1936) that condors were still common at about this time, and that “20 to 30” could be seen in summer.

- 1923— Huey (1926) saw one condor at La Grulla, Sierra San Pedro Martir, on June 12.
- 1924— Huey (1926) saw one condor at Laguna Hanson, Sierra Juarez, on July 21.
- 1924— Salve Meling reported seeing four condors in summer, in the Sierra San Pedro Martir plateau area (J. Grinnell field notes, October 8, 1925, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology).
- 1925— C. Lamb (field notes, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology) saw adult condors in the Sierra San Pedro Martir, at La Grulla (one bird May 14, 2 birds May 18) and at Vallecitos (two on June 6 and 7).
- 1929— A condor egg was allegedly taken from a canyon 50 miles from Ensenada (Anon. 1929, Lume 1938). Presumably three condors were seen in the area. The account (especially the lengthened later version) is obviously much exaggerated and may be a complete fabrication, but the location and some of the “facts” fit well with earlier accounts. It is interesting that the account was published twice, as a brief news article in 1929 and as a feature story almost 10 years later.
- 1932— Two condors were reportedly shot, one at Rancho San José (= Meling Ranch) and one elsewhere in the Sierra San Pedro Martir (Scott 1936).
- 1932— Two condors were seen by G. Bancroft at La Encantada, Sierra San Pedro Martir (Scott 1936, Koford 1953).
- 1933— One condor reportedly killed at Rancho San José (Scott 1936).
- 1934— A. Meling reported two condors in July at La Encantada, Sierra San Pedro Martir, also one later in the summer; another condor was reported at Santo Dumas Flats near Santa Rosa in July (Scott 1936).
- 1935— One was reported at La Encantada on November 5 (S. Meling, in Scott 1936).
- 1937— W. Longhurst (Museum of Vertebrate Zoology) reported three condors feeding on a cow carcass at La Encantada in July (Koford 1953). There is one adult specimen of a California Condor in the Instituto de Biología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. It was collected in northern Baja California, but no collecting data accompanies the specimen.

—U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1190 E. Ojai Avenue, Ojai, CA 93023 (Wilbur) and Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, 1100 Glendon Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024 (Kiff).