

## Condor hatchling's hard path ends early

### Katy Muldoon

Amid efforts to save the California Condor, the Oregon Zoo programme has its first death

The Oregon Zoo's California Condor captive breeding programme has suffered its first fatality with the death of a nine-day-old chick. The chick's remains were discovered last Tuesday outside a nest at the Jonsson Center for Wildlife Conservation in Clackamas County, the zoo announced Monday. "It was a very sad outcome to a very dramatic story," said Shawn St. Michael, assistant curator for birds. The chick was the third this season and the seventh produced since the zoo began breeding endangered California Condors in 2003. It had worried keepers and veterinarians since 31 March 2006, when condor No. 147 produced the egg – her first – in dramatic fashion. Instead of laying it gently, she launched it: The egg flew about 8 inches behind her and dropped about 10 inches into the nest's sand. The shell appeared undamaged, but nearly two months later, when keepers used radiographic imaging to examine the egg's contents, they saw that the chick was positioned upside-down. Its head was at the egg's small end, rather than at the big end, where the air sac, is. Without that air, the chick would have suffocated as it tried to hatch. "It's one that wouldn't have survived in the wild," said St. Michael, adding that for condors and other species, mothers' first eggs frequently pose problems. Keepers and veterinarians stepped in. They scraped away enough shell so the chick could breathe, then pulled bits of shell away to help the bird hatch. On 29

May, they placed the chick into the nest with its parents, condors No. 137 and 147. Keepers watched. Video cameras mounted in nests provide 24-hour-a-day views of the action inside, although the parents' 20-plus-pound bodies make it difficult to see chicks underneath. The last time keepers spotted this chick was on 5 June running around the nest. But Tuesday, keeper Kelli Walker couldn't see a chick through the camera. She investigated and found only remains. The parents appeared to have eaten most of the chick – natural behavior for scavengers such as condors. Keepers reviewed videotapes, St. Michael said, but still couldn't tell what had happened. Such deaths are not uncommon in the breeding program, which began in 1988 and includes two California zoos and one private facility in Idaho. Each birth and death are significant for the species, which had dwindled to fewer than two dozen birds in the early 1980s; today, California Condors number about 270. Whether in captivity or the wild, some chicks die of natural causes. Some get stepped on when their parents squabble in the nest; sometimes, parents kill their chicks for reasons unknown. "This chick," St. Michael said, "may have had a congenital condition that wasn't obvious during its physical examination." The bird's remains will be sent to the San Diego Zoo for analysis, but the cause of death may never be known. Oregon's remaining two chicks appear healthy.

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