

NEWS

Condors back after long absence from Grand Canyon

Larry Bleiberg

Grand Canyon, Arizona – Visitors usually come to the Grand Canyon to look down. Now there's a reason to look up. Dozens of California Condors, a species nearly extinct 20 years ago, soar in the wild above northern Arizona. Many can be seen at the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, riding thermals in the sky in sight of the thousands of guests who visit daily. The condors, the largest land-based bird in North America, stand four feet tall and sport a wingspan of more than nine feet. They are easy to spot: large, jet-black birds with triangular white patches on the bottoms of their wings. The birds have attracted quite a following. Shelly and Jon Soderberg of Sacramento, California, had been waiting 90 minutes to see them. Joining them were their 12-year-old son and his friend. Suddenly, two condors began circling above the canyon's Bright Angel Trail, briefly perching on rocks a few dozen feet from the rim. "It's a bit neater seeing them here than at the zoo," Soderberg said as he zoomed in on them with a digital camera. Saving the birds has taken decades. Condors, which once lived throughout North America, saw their territory decline over the millennia. But the population plummeted in the past century due to habitat loss, pesticides and hunting (the birds are scavengers, and those that eat game shot

by hunters are poisoned by the lead in the ammunition). By 1982, the birds were all but gone. Only 22 remained. "It's about as close to extinct as you can come," said Thom Lord, field manager for The Peregrine Fund, an international bird conservation group. In a last-ditch effort to save the species, biologists in 1987 removed all of the birds from the wild. Then conservationists began a breeding program at zoos in California and Oregon. Success came quickly. After five years, the population had bounced back to a few hundred birds. When it was time to reintroduce them to the wild, some birds were returned to southern California, but as an experiment, six were brought to northern Arizona, where they had not been seen since 1924. The condors had trouble adapting at first. Most were juveniles that didn't know proper bird behaviour. For example, several roosted near the ground, where they were prey to coyotes. Another drank antifreeze and died. And many are still hurt by lead poisoning. Now there are about 70 condors in northern Arizona, and up to 20 may be in the Grand Canyon area at any time. The conservation effort and reintroduction has been coordinated by The Peregrine Fund, which monitors the birds to keep them from harm's way. "We follow the birds around and keep them out of

trouble,” Lord said. “We serve as their parents.” All condors are recaptured yearly for medical evaluation, and each is equipped with a radio transmitter that fits on its wing like an iPod holder. That’s why, along with birds, Grand Canyon visitors are likely to spot a field researcher at the rim, waving a large multiprong antenna at the sky to track condors in the area. Field assistant Roger Benefield said canyon tourists are full of questions. Some think he’s searching for water, for cellphone signals or even for UFOs. Benefield follows the birds closely. Condors are very curious and must be trained to stay away from humans. That requires hazing the birds by throwing pebbles at them or making noise when they get too close to the Grand Canyon crowds. But visitors who get a glimpse of the scavengers are thrilled. Christian and Jonathon Currey of Spokane, Washington, had heard about the birds on a Discovery Channel show. When they planned their honeymoon for the Grand Canyon, they had hoped to see them on the wing. “We thought it would be dumb luck if we could,” said Currey. But they were getting a clear

view now. “Come on, baby!” his wife urged as a big black bird circled above the canyon walls.

Condor facts:

- California Condors are the largest North American land-based bird.
- They nearly went extinct due to poisoning, hunting and power-line collisions.
- At one point the bird thrived across North America, but in the last 6,000 years, they retreated to the western United States.
- The bird can reach a height of about four feet. Its wingspan is about 9.5 feet; weight, about 20 pounds.
- The population of California Condors had declined to 22 by 1987. Now it is approaching 300.

If you go:

Finding condors: Condors are often seen near the South Rim of the Grand Canyon from spring through early fall. The best time for viewing is between 09h00 and 10h00, and around 17h00.

Resources:

- Grand Canyon travel information: www.nps.gov/grca
- Arizona travel information: www.arizonaguide.com
- For more on the condor: www.peregrinefund.org, listed under “Conservation Projects”

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