A Success Story Faces New Challenges

By Michael Woodbridge and Scott Flaherty

California condor *(Gymnogyps californianus).* *Photo Credit: Scott Flarhety, USFWS*

It's not quite noon and it is already a scorcher of a day in southern California. On a remote sandstone cliff near Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge, Joseph Brandt, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) California Condor Recovery Program, carefully works his way down over a crumbling rock bulge and onto a narrow ledge below. Steadying himself, Joseph peers into the darkness of the small cavity in front of him, where he finds what he has been looking for—a fluffy mound of feathers, pacing nervously in the dusty cave. This condor nest is home to a healthy chick.

The return of California condors to the wild is a remarkable conservation success story. Today, condors soar over California, Arizona, Utah and Baja California—a dramatic reversal of fortunes for this majestic icon of the American West. In 1982, the population of condors was in steep decline. With only 23 birds remaining in the world, the California condor was on the verge of extinction.

In an effort to conserve these magnificent birds, the Service—with help from a number of partnering organizations—implemented an aggressive recovery program, which involved capturing all remaining wild condors in 1987 and placing in a captive breeding program at the Los Angeles Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Five years would pass before a condor would fly freely in the skies above North America.

After the first captive condors were successfully bred in 1988, the Service began the challenge of releasing young and inexperienced chicks back into the wild. A diverse network of partners continues to support the Service in restoring these magnificent birds to the American landscape. Zoos and non-profit conservation organizations continue to provide captive breeding expertise, veterinary care and support for reintroductions. Federal and state wildlife agencies, as well as the Mexican government, make it possible for California condors to soar again. Hundreds of volunteers donate thousands of hours of their time to monitoring condor nests, tracking birds, and reaching out to local communities and schools to promote an understanding of and appreciation for condors.

Vince Gerwe, a long-time condor volunteer, spends many of his weekends hiking to remote condor nest sites, where he monitors nest activity using a spotting scope while perched on a neighboring hillside. "These birds

are absolutely amazing," says Gerwe. "Volunteering for the Condor Program allows me to spend time in truly wild places, while helping condors by monitoring their health and behavior. It's a way for me to help ensure this unique animal remains a part of our landscape for my children and grandchildren."

Today, there are nearly 400 condors in the world. The California Condor Recovery Program reached an important milestone in 2008, when the number of wild condors surpassed the number of captive condors. In 2011, the California Condor Recovery Program was able to celebrate the fact that condors are again breeding in the wild, that a record number of condor eggs were laid by a record number of breeding pairs, and that there are now more condors flying freely in the skies of North America since before the Recovery Program began.

While the future is certainly brighter for the California condor, these birds face continuing threats to their survival, including habitat loss, lead poisoning, micro trash, predation and indiscriminate shooting. Now, a new challenge to condor health and recovery has emerged: wind energy development.

California condors roost in tree snags on the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. *USFWS*

Ambitious state and federal renewable energy goals have fueled unprecedented growth of renewable energy projects in southern California within the last few years. The growing footprint of wind energy projects has implications for California condors and other imperiled species. These projects are associated with topography and wind currents that overlap with areas ideal for soaring, nesting and foraging habitat for condors, bald and golden eagles and other migratory birds.

"Condors are expanding into areas where warm air currents allow them to soar above ridge tops and canyons as they travel throughout their range," says Jesse Grantham, California Condor Recovery Program Coordinator. "These areas of strong air currents are also attractive sites for wind turbines. In these areas, the potential for collisions with wind turbines can be high."

To help reduce collision risks to birds, the Service is working with energy project developers to develop guidelines that ensure projects are designed and located in a way that minimizes impacts to condors, eagles and other wildlife.

"It is important that these projects are developed in an environmentally sound way," says Ashleigh Blackford, Renewable Energy Coordinator for the Service's Pacific Southwest Region. "We encourage project developers to involve us early-on when planning projects. Working with industry, we can help ensure continued conservation of condors and other species that may be impacted by renewable energy projects while still advancing renewable energy technologies."

A California condor watches over its 30-day old chick in a nest cave near Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. *Photo Credit: Joseph Brandt, USFWS*

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