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LAST WILD CALIFORNIA CONDOR CAPTURED FOR BREEDING PROGRAM

The last remaining wild California condor has been captured by biologists from the California Condor Research Center and has joined 26 other members of the species in two zoos in a continuing effort to breed the majestic bird-of-prey in captivity and rescue the species from extinction.

A 7-year-old male condor, known to biologists as "AC-9," was captured on Sunday April 19 at 10:15 a.m. PDT on Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge with a cannon net and transported to the San Diego Wild Animal Park where veterinarians pronounced it healthy and in good condition. "AC-9" is believed to be the last California condor still living in what remains of the species' range, the rugged coastal hill country northwest of Los Angeles.

After a brief quarantine, "AC-9" will join 13 other birds at the wild animal park where it is hoped that it can be mated successfully with any of the six females currently in captivity there. An additional 13 condors are held in a similar breeding program at the Los Angeles Zoo. Although there have not yet been any successful matings of California condors in captivity, biologists believe that the two programs offer the best, and possibly only, hope for preserving this endangered species.

William P. Horn, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, said, "Our goal remains the same--a healthy, self-sustaining population of California condors in the wild. We plan to return what we have temporarily taken from nature at a time when we better understand the threats that the species faces in the wild and when we are successfully producing new birds."

Biologists at the Condor Research Center, a cooperative project of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the National Audubon Society, estimate that it could take at least 5 years before captive-bred condors could be introduced to the wild. Though it is too early to predict when successful captive breeding of condors might occur, one pair of birds at the San Diego facility has exhibited courtship behavior in recent weeks.

The Fish and Wildlife Service recently took steps to ensure the availability of foraging habitat for a future population of wild condors by acquiring the 11,360-acre Hudson Ranch in southern California as the nucleus

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for the new Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge may serve as a release site for any future reintroduction program.

The Condor Research Center was established in Ventura, California, in 1980, to study the biology and ecology of the condor and to collect eggs and wild birds for establishing a captive-breeding program. Until 1985, condor program administrators had hoped to use surplus birds produced by a captive-breeding colony to supplement the wild population and its breeding pairs. However, following the death or disappearance of four out of the five remaining wild breeding pairs in the winter of 1984-85, it became clear that the small remaining condor population would not likely survive in the wild. Both the State of California and the Fish and Wildlife Service decided in 1985 to capture all remaining wild condors. This decision, arrived at reluctantly by both agencies, was deemed necessary to secure the condors' immediate safety as well as to enhance the species' chances of survival through the captive breeding program.

The California condor, North America's largest flying land bird with a wingspan of up to 9-1/2 feet, once ranged from Florida to British Columbia but, within the past century, its range has been restricted entirely to California.

From a population estimated at 60 to 100 birds in the 1940's, the condor has continued to decline precipitously despite the efforts of private organizations and government agencies to protect and enhance its numbers. Its decline can be attributed to many human-related activities, including loss of habitat and major food sources and the use of pesticides and introduction of contaminants, as well as potential natural causes that are still not fully understood.

Life expectancy of California condors may be as long as 50 years or more in captivity, although very little data exist on the life span of the birds in the wild. Age to maturity is approximately 6 years. "AC-9" successfully mated in the wild at age 6 with an adult female, which was the first instance that sexual maturity at that age had been documented. Condors mate for life and produce a single egg approximately every other year. If the egg is destroyed, a second, and even a third, egg may be laid, a phenomenon known as double- and triple- clutching. Capitalizing on this behavior, condor center biologists have been able to increase the condor population significantly during the period that wild birds were producing eggs. Thirteen of the birds currently in captivity were collected as eggs in the wild and later hatched in zoo incubators.

Biologists have used a cousin of the California condor, the Andean condor, as a "surrogate species" in recent years, successfully breeding it in captivity and releasing it to the wild in South America in an effort to improve their understanding of the life habits of this bird-of-prey. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists this May will reintroduce the red wolf to the wild in the agency's first-ever attempt to restore to nature an endangered species previously extinct in the wild. Prior to this, the red wolf had been in much the same position that the California condor now is--an endangered species looking for a home.