DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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Inez Connor 202/343-5634

SCIENTISTS OBSERVE HISTORIC EVENT: CALIFORNIA CONDOR CHICK HATCHES IN WILD

For the first time ever, scientists have observed the daily incubation and hatching of one of the rarest birds in the world--the California condor--and hopes are high that their observations of the rearing will shed some light on the mystery of why the continent's largest bird is on the brink of extinction.

This season's only known egg hatched out successfully last Wednesday morning as dawn broke over the rugged terrain of a national forest in California. Biologists are not saying exactly where the nest site is for fear curious onlookers would disturb the parents.

Only 20 to 30 of the majestic California condors are left, down by about half in the last decade. Most experts are convinced that time is running out for the enormous vulture that has a spectacular nine-foot wingspan. An emergency rescue program to save it from extinction was launched late last year, funded by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Audubon Society, USDA's Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the California Department of Fish and Game.

"We are delighted that some natural reproduction is occurring, as we suspected," said Robert L. Herbst, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, the lead agency for the joint endeavor. "But sadly, a single chick--or even two--still is not enough to offset the greater mortality loss, nor is it a signal for complacency. We must find out which of the many problems facing the condor are the critical ones if we are to prevent its extinction."

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The mated adult condors were first spotted on March 4 by the joint Condor Research Team from the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society. The birds inspected several possible nest sites before settling inside a small sandstone pocket on a rocky cliff ledge several hundred feet high. The solitary egg, deposited March 15 on loose sandy soil, has since been the object of researchers' daily scrutiny through a telescope so powerful it can detect movement in a bird's eye. The observers have been well concealed in brush a quarter to a half-mile away on another cliff side across the canyon to avoid disrupting the birds' normal behavior pattern. The Forest Service sealed off the nesting site and posted a guard in the area to prevent human disturbance, a serious problem throughout the condors' extensive range. Watchers from the 9-member Condor Research Team have been on the scene on a 24-hour basis for the past three weeks.

They report that the birds took turns incubating the whitish, 5-inch egg without interruption for stretches of 3 to 7 days, alternately going without food or water. The chick started "pipping" the eggshell last Sunday evening and broke through 3 days later on May 14. Covered with dark down, the chick was about the size of a man's fist. "For the first time, we have established the incubation period for California condors," Herbst said. "We have a chick with a known hatching date, so growth rates can be monitored."

The cooperative rescue effort to save the California condor had its origins in the recommendations of government and Audubon biologists who studied the species for the last 15 years and in the recommendations of a special Condor Advisory Panel, convened by the American Ornithologists' Union and the National Audubon in 1978. The scientists on this panel concluded after exhaustive study of all available information that the only reasonable hope for recovery of the wild population lay in greatly expanded field research and captive breeding.

Years of conventional "hands off" research have yielded little reliable data on the problems plaguing the condors because of their extensive range over rugged terrain and the great mobility of the birds. There is no conventional way to insure an accurate count of their numbers or to determine their age and sex compositions, nesting, feeding, and mating activity, or whether their diminishing numbers are due to low reproduction, high mortality, pesticides, pollution, shooting or other unnatural causes.

The rescue program faces a crucial test on May 30 when the California Fish and Game Commission meets in Santa Barbara to decide whether to grant a State permit to trap wild condors this fall for radio telemetry research and captive propagation. The project cannot proceed without the State permit and the companion Federal permit which was advertised for public comment in the May 9 Federal Register.

"We human beings must sometimes intervene on behalf of nature to counter careless and destructive human actions of the past," stated Russell W. Peterson of the National Audubon Society. "When we have forced a species to the brink of extinction, as with the California condor, we have an obligation to rectify the damage as best we can--before it is too late."

Peterson and Herbst pointed to recent successful examples of intervention in helping to restore critically diminished populations of the whooping crane, peregrine falcon, everglade kite, and other endangered species.