DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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FIRST ANDEAN CONDORS RELEASED IN THE WILD

Six young Andean condors, bred and reared in captivity near Washington, D.C., left early Friday morning for the mountains of Peru where they will become the first of the endangered species to be returned to their native wild habitat.

The attempt to ease the young vultures back into the wild will culminate a 13-year experimental condor breeding project by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Maryland, midway between Baltimore and the Nation's Capital.

Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Interior agency, praised the Patuxent Center for its past successes in similar efforts to increase the numbers of endangered species in the wild. "Thanks to the Center's exemplary achievements, the future is better than ever before for the whooping crane, bald eagle, Puerto Rican parrot, Aleutian Canada goose, and masked bobwhite quail--to name but a few of the imperiled wildlife that have benefitted from Patuxent's painstaking work."

Peruvian scientists have been invited to participate in the project, along with researchers from the Patuxent Center and its field station in California, the National Audubon Society, the University of Wisconsin, and the Bronx Zoo.

"The outstanding cooperation we've received from officials in Peru," said Greenwalt, "has been matched only by their enthusiasm for the project and the new information it will generate about this spectacular cousin of our own California condor."

The ultimate goal of the Patuxent research project was to increase the dwindling numbers of California condors in the wild through a captive propagation and release program.

The method: Use a closely related species in a prototype, three-stage study to develop reliable capture, propagation, and reintroduction techniques before trying it with the California condors.

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The surrogate species: The Andean condor, also an endangered species but more numerous than its U.S. cousin.

The outcome 13 years later: Four breeding pairs of wild Andean condors that have produced 12 offspring. Six of the youngest will be used in the first test of the final and most difficult stage of the prototype study. A seventh chick, hatched this spring, also will be released in Peru later this summer.

The Andean condor breeding program started in late 1966 when nine wild condors of varying ages, but mainly immatures, were captured in the Andean region of Argentina and brought to the Patuxent Center. Five years later, the first two birds to reach adulthood paired. Two years later in 1973, they produced the project's first surviving chick. Since that time, all four pairs have reproduced each year, although wild condors generally produce only one egg every other year. At Patuxent the researchers also discovered that they could double normal egg production by removing the young from the parents' enclosure well before the next breeding season. For the past three years, they have "fooled" some of the birds into quadrupling production--laying two eggs each season--by removing the first egg for artificial incubation, thereby stimulating the birds to lay a second time.

The six immature condors now in Peru will range in age from one to three years. Their release in July in two groups of three will be followed some time later by release of five "young of the year" fledgling condors--four of which hatched this spring at the Bronx Zoo and the one from the Patuxent Center. By releasing these different groups, the researchers hope to gather information on the most favorable age and rearing procedures that will enable captive-produced condors to adapt and survive in the wild.

First year mortality rates with other released birds such as fledgling peregrine falcons have averaged about 50 percent. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists want to find out if this same mortality rate will hold with fledgling condors or if their chances improve when the birds are somewhat older. Some peregrine falcon experts currently are considering releasing their birds at a later age to see if that will reduce the mortality rate.

The six juvenile condors from the Patuxent Center have reached full growth with wingspans of 10 to 11 feet. The three males weigh an average 22 pounds, four pounds more than the three females. Still in immature plumage, they will acquire the distinctive white markings along the wingtips and undersides as they approach sexual maturity, probably at around 10 years. Since being selected for release in Peru, they have been kept together in two groups--as they will be released--to form the bonds and social attachments that are expected to make their transition easier. All were raised by their wild Andean condor parents during the critical imprinting period with minimal human contact.

"We are optimistic that these birds will adapt well to the wild," said Dr. Lucille Stickel, Director of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. "Having been reared by wild-caught condors, they should react in their new environment in much the same manner as their free-flying counterparts. Their chances should be pretty good in Peru. Fortunately, if we should encounter problems the first time, we can continue to produce more Andean condors at Patuxent until the reintroduction technique is perfected."

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The Andean condors began their rendezvous with freedom July 11 from Dulles International Airport, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C. They were escorted by Dr. James Carpenter, endangered species research veterinarian at the Patuxent Center, on the 8-hour flight to Lima and then on to the release site in northern Sechura province.

On arrival at the release site, the condors will be grouped in two enclosures until they become acclimated to their new surroundings, where an isolated colony of wild Andean condors roost and feed. A week or two later, the first group of three birds will be released to try their first soaring flight and eventually scavenge for their own food. The birds are wearing specially designed solar radio transmitters so that biologists can monitor their movements and interactions with wild condors. The tiny solar-powered transmitters are expected to operate for three to five years. Working under a research contract from the Fish and Wildlife Service, Dr. Stanley Temple and Michael Wallace of the University of Wisconsin will direct the release and monitoring activities. The Wisconsin researchers will spend several months in Peru this summer and will then arrange to have the birds and radio equipment checked annually.

The long-range rescue program for the California condor was undertaken last December as a joint effort by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Audubon Society, the California Department of Fish and Game, USDA's Forest Service, and Interior's Bureau of Land Management, with special Congressional funding. Several zoos are also cooperating in the project, including those in San Diego, Los Angeles, and the Bronx.

Photos are available by calling 202-343-5612.

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