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CALIFORNIA CONDOR PAIR LAYS SECOND EGG: WILL HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

The pair of California condors that accidentally lost their egg in a domestic squabble in late February have laid a second egg, giving condor biologists cause for rejoicing.

Biologists of the Condor Research Center got their first look at the egg shortly after noon on April 8, when the female rolled it out of a dark corner of the nesthole into full view of an observation station a half mile distant. The egg was produced some time during the previous day, judging from the behavior of the female, and was laid in a cave about 100 yards distant from the cave the pair used for their first egg. Both sites are located in a remote mountainous region northeast of Ventura.

The condor pair's first egg, laid on February 14, was lost over the edge of the cliff 12 days later as the birds fought over which one would sit on it. The condors, believed to be the same pair that successfully fledged a chick in 1980, also squabbled at that time over which would feed the young but the disputes did no apparent harm.

The condor biologists are not only concerned about discord between the condor pair but are also worried about a pair of opportunistic ravens that have already intruded into the condors' nest cave. Ravens are known predators of the eggs of other birds. Progress in the 60-day incubation of the California condor egg laid on April 7 will be closely watched by the research team.

The time between loss of the first egg and laying of the second was about 40 days, according to Dr. Noel Snyder of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and John Ogden of the National Audubon Society, co-leaders of the Condor Research Center. "This is the best evidence yet obtained that the critically endangered California condor will re-nest after a nesting failure early in the breeding season," Dr. Snyder said.

Re-laying after early egg loss has long been known for captive Andean condors, but whether the California species might act similarly has been a matter of conjecture. The question now appears to be resolved.

The ability of the Andean condors to re-lay after failure has enabled zoos and research institutions such as the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to greatly increase the breeding rate of this close relative of the California condor. Andean condors, like California condors, normally lay only a single egg every other year. If an egg is removed from the nest to be hatched in an incubator, the pair can usually be expected to lay a second egg about a month later, a process called "double clutching." If the second egg is likewise removed, the parents sometimes will even lay a third egg. In this way, captive reproduction can be multiplied greatly over what pairs produce in the wild.

Biologists hope to be able to double and triple clutch captive California condors. Captive breeding of California condors recently received Federal and State approval as an important part of the efforts to save the species from extinction. Only about 30 California condors remain in the wild, all in southern California. There is only one individual in captivity, a male bird at the Los Angeles Zoo named Topatopa.

Synder and Ogden emphasize the importance of the recent proof of natural double clutching to the captive breeding program. If wild pairs will re-nest after early failure, it should be possible to establish a captive population by taking wild eggs for artificial incubation without having much effect on natural wild production and without reducing the size of the wild population.

Only four other active pairs of condors have been located by the research team. One of these produced a fledgling last year and is not expected to breed this year as they are still caring for this youngster. None of the other three pairs has laid as yet, with one month to go in the egg laying season. The research team is keeping close track of all these pairs from a safe distance.

Intensive observation of breeding pairs is just one aspect of the condor research program, conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society. Recently, permission was granted by the State of California and the Service for the team to capture limited numbers of juvenile and non-breeding adult condors for captive breeding and radio telemetry. No birds have been caught in the first two months of trapping effort, although several have visited the bait sites. The captive breeding program will be conducted at the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the Los Angeles Zoo. Birds trapped for radio telemetry will be outfitted with small solar transmitters on their wings and then released.

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