DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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DOUBLE-DIVIDEND: RESEARCHERS NET AND RELEASE TWO ADULT CALIFORNIA CONDORS

Two adult California condors were captured November 13 northeast of Ventura and were released two hours later, after researchers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society took blood samples from both and attached tiny radio transmitters to one.

Results of the blood samples, analyzed by the San Diego Zoo, revealed that the radio-tagged bird is a male. Results on the second condor were inconclusive.

The condors landed near the baited trap site about 1 p.m. Saturday and at first were very nervous and wary. They soon settled down and engaged in what appeared to be courtship display before approaching the bait, the carcass of a stillborn calf.

"They appeared to be a mated pair, staying very close to one another," said Audubon's John Ogden. "They came to the bait shoulder to shoulder, chasing away an eagle. It was apparent that we couldn't trap one without trapping both."

Ogden fired the cannon net at 1:12. Aside from some initial hissing, the condors immediately became calm and did not struggle while the blood samples were taken by Dr. Philip Ensley, veterinarian from the San Diego Zoo.

"We're elated by the successful capture of two condors," Ogden said. "We had absolutely no problems handling both of them. This demonstrates that condors can be safely trapped without ill effects."

Ogden said the research team is also excited by the possibility that the pair may be breeders, even though lab results are inconclusive on the sex of the second bird. "If they are a breeding pair, the transmitters will lead us to their nest site and we will be able to observe their behavior from courtship to egg hatching and beyond."

The smaller of the two birds, now known to be a male, was outfitted with dual solar-powered radio transmitters on each wing and a white plastic-type tag bearing the number 2. The condors were released at 3:15 and immediately flew down the valley, one behind the other. They turned, crossed the valley again, and eventually roosted together about a mile from the capture site in the tops of tall pine trees on a steep slope, an area previously thought to be a roost site. The condors roosted there Saturday and Sunday nights and have stayed in the area, flying with other condors. The radio-tagged bird has preened himself and has paid no particular attention to the transmitters.

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One of the transmitters also has a newly developed, long-life battery that serves as an alternate power source at night or when the sun's rays cannot reach the solar panel. The 7-year pacemaker battery switches on automatically and sends a slower pulse than the solar power, and lasts more than 3 times longer conventional batteries.

"This dual capacity transmitter is a real breakthrough," said Dr. Noel Snyder of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "It ensures that we will always know where the bird is, day or night. If the bird is down on its back, or in the water or an oil sump, the pacemaker will signal and we will be able to go to the condor's aid quickly. On the other hand, if it has died, we will be able to find it promptly so that we can examine the carcass before it decomposes, to try to learn the cause of death."

Snyder and Ogden estimate that as few as 20 condors now remain in the southern California foothills, down significantly from the previous estimates of upwards of 30. "Reproduction is better than we had thought," Ogden said. "But, unfortunately, the mortality rate appears to be even greater--perhaps as many as five or six a year--and no one knows the cause. We are hoping the radio transmitters will help us find the cause so that we can do something to correct it and reverse this downward trend."

Meanwhile, Condor #1, an immature male that was trapped October 12 and was released three days later wearing solar radio tags, is slowly drifting back south from its 75 mile sojourn to the north. He is now about 50 miles north of his capture site and is active from about 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., when the wind currents are strong enough to support him. The bird has led researchers to other California condors, but all were birds that had been identified previously in photographs. Both radio-tagged birds are being carefully monitored.

The research team will resume its efforts to trap an immature condor or an unmated adult female as a mate for Topa-Topa, a male condor at the Los Angeles Zoo. The first condor removed from the wild for captive breeding, an immature male chick, continues to do well at the San Diego Wild Animal Park.

The California condor research and captive breeding program, a joint project by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Audubon Society, California Department of Fish and Game, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, began in late 1979.

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