

Winging It

American Birding Association

A Rare Chance to View Nesting Condors

By John Moir

We're standing on a chaparral-covered ridgeline in Central California looking for a once-impossible sight: a pair of condors nesting in the wild.

The leader of our small birding group, Mark Paxton, aims his spotting scope across a narrow canyon toward a lichen-covered cliff face and zooms in on a large shallow cave near the top. *There!* In Paxton's eyepiece appears a crystal-sharp image of a California Condor sheltering her napping month-old chick.

A downy layer of blue-gray feathers covers the young bird. Its head and beak are pale gray, and its eyes are jet black. In proportion to its young body, its nearly adult-size feet look gigantic.

Through at least the end of October, the condor nest is available for limited public viewing. This is the first time in the history of the condor recovery program that a nest is open for observation, and it offers birders an unparalleled opportunity to see a condor chick with its parents.

The nest is located twelve miles from Pinnacles National Monument, and the chick is the first condor born in the Pinnacles area in more than seventy years. Several years ago, the two parent birds were released by the Ventana Wildlife Society that manages the condor recovery program in Central California.

The guided tours, which Paxton leads, are available through the Pinnacles Partnership, a nonprofit group that works in collaboration with Pinnacles National Monument. Paxton is the group's program's director. The viewing opportunity is a cooperative effort with the RS Bar Guest Ranch, an eighteen-thousand-acre land holding where the nest is located.

The condor pair are first-time parents, and despite their inexperience, they picked a great nest site. "It's a shade-filled cavity high on the cliff and well out of the reach of predators," Paxton said. The entire nest is visible from the ridge-top overlook.

Biologists discovered the nest through data collected from miniature radio-tracking devices attached to the wings of the released parent condors. In April, when the pair's egg was almost ready to hatch, two recovery-team members rappelled down to the cave and replaced the original egg with one from the condor-breeding program at the Los Angeles Zoo.

“We wanted to increase the pair’s chance of success by giving them an egg we knew would hatch,” said Joe Burnett, a senior wildlife biologist for the Ventana Wildlife Society. Burnett, one of the climbers who entered the cave, said the egg exchange also allowed biologists to test the original egg for DDE, a breakdown product of the once-ubiquitous pesticide DDT.

With a wingspan of nearly ten feet, California Condors are North America’s largest bird. In 1982, only twenty-two California Condors remained in the world. Although they are still extremely rare, thanks to the success of the recovery program the condor’s numbers have increased to about 320 birds. More than half of these condors now fly free in various locations in the Western U.S. and Baja California.

Condors are slow breeders with parent birds usually raising one chick every other year. It takes a young condor about five months before it attempts its first flight. And, because immature birds remain dependant on their parents after fledging, they stay close to their nest site for several more months.

We linger on the ridge a few more minutes before heading down the mountain. Through the spotting scope, we can see every detail of the cliff face, from the conglomeration of fragmented igneous rock to two discarded condor feathers in front of the nest site. A western tanager calls from overhead.

For a moment, it's possible to imagine we've traveled back in time to an earlier landscape filled with birdsong and the fragrance of pine, back to when California Condors still ruled the skies.

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John Moir is an award-winning science writer and author of RETURN OF THE CONDOR: The Race To Save Our Largest Bird From Extinction. The book was a finalist for the 2008 William Saroyan International Writing Prize at Stanford University.

Sidebar

Visiting the Nest Site

Guided public tours to the condor nest site are by reservation only. Visitors are transported in a safari jeep on a dirt trail to the ridge overlook. The 45-minute journey passes through pastureland and then climbs into chaparral-covered hills. Cost is \$125 per person and arrangements can be made by contacting the Pinnacles Partnership at info@pinnaclespartnership.org or 831-389-4486, ext. 239. Overnight accommodations are available at the RS Bar Guest Ranch, at Pinnacles National Monument, or in nearby Hollister.