

Saving the California CONDOR

BY ELAINE A. RICHMAN

It looked like extinction for the California condor. Only 24 remained alive. Was the species doomed?

Almost. But this spring an egg hatched in the wild for the first time in about 20 years. The chick and its parents bring new hope for the survival of the species.

How did condors become endangered? Human development in the areas the big birds flew presented many hazards. Deadly collisions with power lines took many birds' lives. Habitat destruction meant the loss of nesting and hunting territory. Pesticide poisoning led to unhealthy eggs and a drop in hatchlings.

Scientists needed to move quickly to save the big birds. The San Diego Zoo and the Los Angeles Zoo, in California, started a bold program. Biologists captured every California condor living in the wild. "No one had successfully raised a California condor in captivity before," says Greg Austin, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Still, it was worth a try.

In zoos the birds could live and lay eggs safely. If all went as planned, condor numbers would increase, and the birds could be released back into the wild.

The plan to help condors included tricking them into laying more eggs. Normally condors lay one egg each year. But as researchers took each egg that a captive condor laid and placed it in an incubator to hatch, the female laid a replacement.

Another sneaky tactic was for the researchers to hide their faces and feed the chicks with puppets that looked like adult condor heads. That kept the chicks from bonding with humans and becoming tame. Today 80 condors live free. Better yet, scientists are keeping a hopeful watch on the wild spring chick.



Opposite: After a messy meal, a condor often wipes its head on grass to clean up.

Left: Four newly released young condors feed on a calf carcass.

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