

California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*)**Species Status Statement.**Distribution

Currently, there are four wild California condor populations. Two are in California; one is in Baja California, Mexico; and one is in northern Arizona and southern Utah (the latter is termed the Southwest population, despite being the most northeasterly-located of the four). In southern Utah, condors reside almost exclusively in and around Zion National Park and the Kolob Terrace of Iron, Kane and Washington counties. (Southwest Condor Review Team 2017, The Peregrine Fund data). Individual condors occasionally leave this area on brief trips lasting a few days. On these brief trips, Southwest condors have traveled as far as southeast Nevada, Grand Junction, Colorado, and Flaming Gorge, Wyoming (Southwest Condor Review Team 2017).

Table 1. Utah counties currently occupied by this species.

California Condor
BEAVER
GARFIELD
GRAND
IRON
KANE

Abundance and Trends

After more than a century of decline, by 1984 the wild California condor population had dropped to 15 individuals. Managers decided to capture all these birds, bring them into captivity, and start a breeding program (USFWS 2013). By 1987, none remained in the wild.

The captive breeding program was successful. In 1992 the first captive--bred California condors were released into the wild, in California. In 1996, managers expanded the releases to Arizona's Vermilion Cliffs (Southwest Condor Review Team 2012). Condors are now breeding successfully on their own in California, Arizona and Utah (USFWS 2013, Southwest Condor Review Team 2017). However, releases of captive-bred birds are still needed to maintain these populations.

At the end of 2017, the global population of California condors was 463, consisting of 290 wild birds (82 in the Southwest population) and 173 captive ones (USFWS 2018). Though California condor numbers continue to increase annually, wild populations are still dependent on releases of captive-bred birds. With fewer than 500 individuals, California condor remains one of the rarest animal species in the world (USFWS 2013).

Statement of Habitat Needs and Threats to the Species.

Habitat Needs

California condors are vultures. They are dependent on herds of ungulates, feeding exclusively on deceased big game and domestic livestock (USFWS 1996). Condors make wide-ranging, soaring flights to find carrion (USFWS 1996, USFWS 2013). They feed primarily in open areas of foothills and flats (USFWS 1996, USFWS 2013).

This species requires vast, undeveloped landscapes with canyons, cliffs and rocky outcroppings. Cliffs provide nesting (caves and alcoves), perching/resting, and roosting habitat. Condors also perch and roost in large conifer trees on and near cliffs (USFWS 1996, USFWS 2013). Cliff and canyon geography creates excellent conditions for the wind patterns necessary for this largest and heaviest North American bird to climb and soar in search of food.

Threats to the Species

Lead poisoning is the dominant cause of mortality in the Southwest population, and the greatest obstacle to recovery of the species in the wild (Green et al 2008, Finkelstein et al 2012, Southwest Condor Review Team 2017). Condors ingest lead when they feed on hunter-discarded gut piles, and lost game animals, during and following fall hunting seasons. They may die directly from lead toxicity, or be so compromised by it that they succumb to secondary causes (Southwest Condor Review Team 2017).

Predation is a distant second in the diagnosed causes of mortality in the Southwest population (Southwest Condor Review Team 2012). Predation is most often associated with inappropriate behavior (e.g., roost site selection) in recently-released birds. The primary predators of California condors are golden eagles and coyotes.

Condors are visual foragers, and they actively investigate potential indicators of the presence of food. This trait has brought them into contact with humans and human infrastructure. Perching on power poles and flying into power lines has killed a few condors, and roosting on cabins has brought them into conflict with humans (USFWS 2013).

Condors are long-lived birds. Andean condors in captivity live 60-70 years and at least one California condor lived nearly 50 years in captivity before re-release to the wild (USFWS 2013). Most long-lived species are late to mature and produce few young; condors are no exception. It takes 6-8 years for a condor to reach sexual maturity and they produce one chick every other year (USFWS 2013). This low reproductive rate makes recovery from mortality events a long and slow process.

Table 2. Summary of a Utah threat assessment and prioritization completed in 2014. This assessment applies to the species' entire distribution within Utah. For species that also occur elsewhere, this assessment applies only to the portion of their distribution within Utah. The full

threat assessment provides more information including lower-ranked threats, crucial data gaps, methods, and definitions (UDWR 2015; Salafsky et al. 2008).

California Condor
High
Incidental Poisoning
Loss of Genetic Exchange / Inbreeding
Natural Rarity
Medium
Droughts
Inappropriate Fire Frequency and Intensity

Rationale for Designation.

California condor is one of the rarest animals in the world. It has been a federally endangered species since 1967 (USFWS 1996). Captive breeding will remain a necessary part of recovery for many years (USFWS 2013). Though foraging and reproducing on their own, wild populations have not yet reached the point of self-sustainability: primarily because of lead toxicity. These populations continue to require intensive management. Efforts by Utah and Arizona have focused on voluntary non-lead ammunition programs (Southwest Condor Review Team 2017). Hunter participation in these voluntary programs is high, and has recently reached the level Green et al (2008) predicted would be necessary to moderate the lead toxicity threat. Hunter answers to a questionnaire during the 2018 Utah hunting season indicated considerable support for condor conservation, and willingness to continue the use of non-lead ammunition toward that goal (DWR files).

Economic Impacts of Sensitive Species Designation.

Sensitive species designation is intended to facilitate management of this species, which is required to reverse Endangered Species Act Listing and lessen related economic impacts. California condor is currently listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, and while the experimental non-essential (10[j]) status in Utah has alleviated many regulatory impacts from their reintroduction, they still trigger Section 7(a)(4) consultation for all activities with a federal nexus, a regulatory burden for diverse land management actions in southwestern Utah.

Literature Cited.

Finkelstein, M.E., D.F. Doak, D. George, J. Burnett, J. Brandt, M. Church, J. Grantham, and D.R. Smith. 2012. Lead poisoning and the deceptive recovery of the critically endangered California condor. Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. June 25, 2012.

Green, R.E., W.G. Hunt, C.N. Parish, and I. Newton. 2008. Effectiveness of action to reduce exposure of free-ranging California condors in Arizona and Utah to lead from spent ammunition. PLoS ONE 3(12): e4022. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.

Salafsky, N., D. Salzer, A.J. Stattersfield, C. Hilton-Taylor, R. Neugarten, S.H.M. Butchart, B. Collen, N. Cox, L.L. Master, S. O'Connor, and D. Wilkie. 2008. A standard lexicon for biodiversity conservation: unified classifications of threats and actions. Conservation Biology 22: 897–911.

Southwest Condor Review Team. 2012. A review of the third five years of the California condor reintroduction program in the Southwest (2007-2011). 94 pp.

Southwest Condor Review Team. 2017. California Condor Recovery Program in the Southwest. Fourth Review (2012-2016). 47pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS]. 1996. California Condor Recovery Plan, Third Revision. Portland, Oregon, USA. 62 pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS]. 2013. California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) 5-Year Review: Summary and Evaluation. Pacific Southwest Region. Sacramento, California. 64pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS]. 2018. California condor recovery program. 2017 Annual Population Status. 7pp. https://www.fws.gov/cno/es/CalCondor/PDF_files/2017-CA-condor-population-status.pdf

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources [UDWR]. 2015. Utah Wildlife Action Plan: A plan for managing native wildlife species and their habitats to help prevent listings under the Endangered Species Act 2015-2025. Publication Number 15-14, 385 pp.