

California Condor *Gymnogyps californianus*

California Condors could be seen regularly in San Diego County in the 1800s and nested in the rugged foothills and mountains. By the 1880s the population was in collapse, and the condor was extirpated from the county about 1910. By 1987 the species' extinction was imminent, when the last three wild birds were taken into captivity. Techniques for breeding and raising condors in captivity, pioneered at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, allowed releases of captive-bred birds to begin in 1992. By 2003, the releases nearest San Diego County were in Ventura County to the northwest and the Sierra San Pedro Martir to the south.

Breeding distribution: The California Condor was "fairly common" in San Diego County until the 1880s (Stephens 1919a, Scott 1936) and survived along the San Luis Rey River until about 1910 (J. B. Dixon in Willett 1933). Definitely reported nest sites were "in the mountains near Warner's Ranch" (Heermann 1859), along Boulder Creek in the Cuyamaca Mountains (M18/M19; Gedney 1900), Palomar Mountain (Willett 1933), 1.5 miles north of De Luz (B6; WFVZ), and near the Escondido Canal intake from the San Luis Rey River (F14; L. F. Kiff). The birds ranged toward the coast at least as far as Poway (M11;



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Emerson 1887). The latest sighting reported to be in San Diego County, of two "a few miles north of Palomar Mountain" on 3 August 1933 (Meadows 1933), was more likely in Riverside County.

Conservation: The most important of the many factors killing condors and causing the species' near extinction was poisoning by lead, ingested when the birds fed on animals that had been shot (Snyder and Schmitt 2002). For history of the condor's controversial decline and tentative restoration, see Koford (1953), Wilbur (1978), Snyder and Snyder (2000), and Snyder and Schmitt (2002).