

Tejon Ranch and the California Condor

Southern California's Tejon Ranch has long been recognized as an important foraging site for California Condors. Covering 425 square miles, the property is the critical link connecting the Coast Ranges with the Sierra Nevada. The condor is one of up to 20 Audubon Watchlist Species that call the ranch home.

A safe haven for the condor

The California Condor is among the rarest, most imperiled birds in the world. Although it can be found in several southwestern states and in Mexico, it is a distinct part of California's natural heritage, so much so that it was recently included on state's U.S. quarter. Down to just 23 birds in the world in the 1980s, captive breeding brought the species back from the brink of extinction to more than 300 alive today.

Audubon condor biologists have been working at the Tejon Ranch since the 1960s, and it was on the Tejon Ranch that the last wild condor was trapped by Audubon and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1987. Today, half of the roughly 40 southern California Condors visit the ranch to feed, and the long-term recovery of the species is dependent upon its ability to use the Tejon Ranch's vast woodlands and grasslands for foraging, as well as a stepping stone to move between the Coast Ranges and the Sierra Nevada.

In May 2007, Tejon Ranch was one of the first private landowners to ban lead ammunition on its property, and the state followed suit in 2007 with a ban in condor habitat areas. Condors frequently feed on animal carcasses left behind by hunters, and ingest dangerously high levels of lead from ammunition.

The Tejon Ranch Conservation Agreement and Condors

In May 2008, Audubon California, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Endangered Habitats League and the Planning and Conservation League announced a far-reaching agreement with the Tejon Ranch Company that to protect 240,000 acres of the ranch, establish an



independent Tejon Ranch Conservancy with permanent funding to support direct species and habitat conservation and restoration. In exchange, the environmental partners agreed not to oppose developments on 10% of the ranch.

Meeting the condor's needs was a critical element of this agreement. The negotiators reviewed condor flight data to understand how condors are using the Tejon Ranch, and based on that data were able to secure a number of important protections for the condor, including:

- Making the lead ammunition ban binding;
- Pulling back development on Grapevine, Squirrel and Lolas ridges;
- Removing all proposed development from Tunis Ridge;
- Pulling back development 3.5 miles on Geghus Ridge;
- Protecting the vast majority of the ranch's backcountry under conservation easements.
- A newly formed conservancy will work closely with the USFWS to establish condor feeding and monitoring programs and is expected to hire a condor biologist in the coming years.

The USFWS will have the final word on whether the proposed development on the Tejon Ranch, including Tejon Mountain Village, is compatible with the continuing

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presence of the California Condor as it reviews and eventually approves the proposed Tehachapi Uplands Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan.

Condor Critical Habitat

The Tejon Ranch includes 128,600 acres of California Condor Critical Habitat, and under the agreement at least 110,000 acres or about 86% will receive permanent protection. The Tejon Ranch is proposing to develop within a footprint of 19,000 acres – the actual disturbance will be considerably less – and therefore it needs to pursue a Habitat Conservation Plan and a permit from the USFWS in order to proceed.

Nothing in the agreement precludes any member of the public from participating in the review process conducted by the USFWS, or any of the many other review processes related to these developments. If the USFWS believes that additional steps are warranted, it will require them, and in so doing will build on the clear and certain conservation outcomes achieved by the Tejon Ranch Agreement.

Expert input

Several recognized condor biologists reviewed the proposed developments and made recommendations to minimize harm and maximize condor recovery across the entire property. These included:

- Pete Bloom, one of the top biologists in the Audubon/USFW recovery program in the 1980s;
- Lloyd Kiff, Ph.D.;
- Robert Reisborough, Ph.D.
- Other experts from the environmental organizations, including Graham Chisholm, who has lead Audubon California's condor conservation project.

Bloom is a hero to the condor, and the stories of him lying in holes to catch and protect the last wild condors in the '80s are legend. Without people like him, there likely would be no condors left. Bloom and the other scientists had

total freedom to analyze the plans and agree or disagree, and to do so publicly. They made a number of strong recommendations, including protecting the key condor foraging ridges, and each was incorporated into the plan.

Audubon California and the Condor

Audubon's involvement in the preservation of this California icon began back in the 1930s and continues with Audubon California's work today. Funding the first scientific study of condors by Carl Koford at UC Berkeley in the 1930s, Audubon continued to support condor conservation by hiring wardens to patrol Tejon Ranch in the 1960s. When lead poisoning began decreasing the condor population, Audubon California helped pass legislation banning the use of lead ammunition in condor range throughout California.

Audubon California is partnering with the American Ornithologists' Union to convene a Blue Ribbon Panel to review the California Condor recovery program's 25-year history. The report will be issued in August 2008.

The Tejon Ranch Conservancy

Audubon California will be supporting the establishment of the Tejon Ranch Conservancy, and Graham Chisholm (Audubon California's Director of Conservation) will serve as the Conservancy's convening Chairman. The mission of new Tejon Ranch Conservancy will be to preserve, enhance and restore the native biodiversity and ecosystem values of the Tejon Ranch and Tehachapi Range. The independent organization will work collaboratively with the Tejon Ranch to promote long-term, science-based conservation projects on behalf of the California Condor and other sensitive species.

Additional information

For more information about California Condors from Audubon California, please visit: www.ca.audubon.org.

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