



# The Sandpiper

June 2022



Redwood Region Audubon Society

www.rras.org

*This issue is in honor of prey-go-neesh, and the Yurok Tribe and allies who brought them home*

## PREY-GO-NEESH KEECH KE-ME'-YEHL – CONDORS HAVE COME HOME!

*Yurok/English language translation courtesy of the Yurok Tribe*

Many generations have come and gone in the century since prey-go-neesh – North America's largest bird – last flew the skies above Yurok country and the redwood region. Yurok Tribe Chairman, Joseph L. James notes the Tribe's sacred responsibility for ongoing cultural and ecological revitalization centers on establishing and maintaining balance in the natural world. This led to a decision by Yurok elders to bring the culturally significant California Condor home. Tiana Williams-Claussen, Wildlife Department Director of the Yurok Tribe, has dedicated the last 14 years of her life to seeing the return of the condor to her homeland, and can now share that reality with her 3-year-old daughter who will grow up in relation to these birds in their community. One adult, and four youngsters between 2-4 years old, arrived this spring at a specially built holding facility in Redwood National Park (RNP), where the birds will be monitored and cared for until all are ready for release. The older bird, # 746, will act as mentor to the younger ones, who, if everything goes well, will all be released at different times this spring.

For decades, several agencies, organizations, and individuals, have been working with breeding programs to restore this magnificent, listed species to their native territory. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> this year, the Yurok Tribe, RNP, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service collaborated in releasing the very first California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), back into the wilds above the Hehl-keek We'roy (Klamath River) since 1897. The following is a conversation with Tiana Williams-Claussen (TWC), by *The Sandpiper* editor, Gisèle Albertine (Editor), on this exciting and historic occasion:

*Editor:* I greatly appreciate the history of the California Condor Recovery Program (CCRP), that you shared in the October, 2021 issue of *The Sandpiper*, and I recommend everyone read that to get a broader view of what's involved here, but would you start by telling me how it was for you when the birds actually arrived here locally, and you got them into the holding facility – which I know many people have spent so much time preparing.

*TWC:* Yes, it was very exciting. So, the first bird to arrive was our mentor bird, #746, who came from the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey (WCBP) in Idaho, and he just had his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. We brought him in to lend a degree of security to the younger birds. Although he will not actually be released, we brought him in a few days before the younger birds because his presence allows them to become acclimated to the pen, and feel comfortable to start feeding. They look to this older bird and see he has no qualms or issues being here. They did begin feeding immediately, which is really encouraging in terms of their future behavior and adaptability. I was a little bit surprised by the wealth of feelings I had for this mentor bird we brought in, knowing he is going to be returned to the WCBP. He's actually got really good genetics so is very important to the captive breeding program. He will be staying with us at least through this cohort's introduction, and a few months into it, and probably through the next cohort's as well. But, even if he's only visiting us for a few months, he is the first condor who's been in Yurok Country for over a century now. And I just felt incredibly overwhelmed when I got to watch him within our facility figuring out, "Where on earth am I?" I think this is the first time he's ever been in a fully outdoors facility like ours. It's a little bit sad because I know he's going back into captivity to help other young birds. But I've loved watching how excited he gets when the Turkey Vultures are flying over. I was doing pretty good with it all until one of our allies started crying - then I was toast!

*Editor:* I can imagine that aside from your academic interests, just how strong that connection with the birds themselves would be. So, what about the four younger ones, how are they interacting with the mentor, and each other?

Top: Still of A3 and A2 about to take off! By videographer, Matthew Falcon (@motosnfotos).

Right: A3 at the moment of his release on Facebook livestream.

Far Right: Chris West (L) and Tiana watch the release of A3, the first condor to fly free in Yurok Country for over 100 years! Both photos by Matt Mais.



### RRAS Field Trips in JUNE!

- Sat. June 4<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Kathryn Wendel.
  - Sun. June 5<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Eel River Estuary and Preserve. Come learn about this beautiful, wetland habitat east of Centerville Beach, owned and operated by The Wildlands Conservancy. Trip leader: Gail Kenny.
  - Sat. June 11<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Drew Meyer.
  - Sun. June 12<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. *Ralph's walk at the HBNWR is CANCELED.*
  - Sat. June 18<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Gary Friedrichsen.
  - Sun. June 19<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. **This walk is part of the monthly Women and Girls' Bird Walking series and marks the one year-anniversary of these trips!** Note that the June walk will be the third Sunday, rather than on the first weekend of the month. Join trip leader Maddy Rifka-Brunt for a birding tour of Trinidad Head, focusing on nesting seabirds. Maddy has been monitoring nesting seabirds on nearshore rocks and will share her observations and knowledge of these colonially nesting species, likely including cormorants, gulls, and murre. Scopes are strongly encouraged, but we will bring several to share. Contact Janelle at [janelle.choj@gmail.com](mailto:janelle.choj@gmail.com) for reservations and meet-up details.
  - Sun. June 19<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Ralph Bucher will lead a walk on the Eureka Waterfront. This trail is paved and is **wheelchair accessible**.
  - Sat. June 25<sup>th</sup>** – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Ken Burton.
  - Sat. June 25<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Wigi Wetlands Volunteer Workday. Help create bird-friendly native habitat and restore a section of the bay trail behind the Bayshore Mall. Contact Jeremy Cashen at [jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com](mailto:jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com).
  - Sat. June 25<sup>th</sup>** – 9-12 pm. Join Kayak Trinidad, on Trinidad Bay for a morning viewing local seabirds from a kayak (kayaks and gear provided). Cost: \$109/person. Contact Andrew Orahoske at [andrew.RRAS@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.RRAS@gmail.com) for reservations.
  - Sun. June 26<sup>th</sup>** – 9-11am. Birding tour at the Wigi Wetlands portion of the Humboldt Bay Trail. Meet leader Hal Genger at the Bayshore Mall parking lot behind Kohl's Department store for a stroll along the trail looking at birds, plants, and the restoration in progress.
- \*Contact Ralph at [thebook@reninet.com](mailto:thebook@reninet.com) for any walks he leads and all Arcata Marsh walks. \*Contact Field Trip Chair, Janelle Chojnacki at [janelle.choj@gmail.com](mailto:janelle.choj@gmail.com) for all other walks.

~ See our website for COVID protocols.

**(Condors return: Continued on next page)**

## CHAPTER LEADERS:

President – Gail Kenny .....gailkenny@gmail.com  
Vice President – CJ Ralph .....707-822-2015  
Secretary – Open.  
Treasurer – Gary Friedrichsen .....707-822-6543  
Past President – Hal Genger .....707-499-0887  
DIRECTORS-AT-LARGE:  
Ralph Bucher .....707-499-1247  
Pia Gabriel .....707-382-2101  
Harriet Hill .....707-267-4055  
Chet Ogan .....707-442-9353  
Sue Sniado .....sueandscott@suddenlink.net  
Jeremy Cashen .....214-605-7368

## OTHER CHAPTER LEADERS:

Conservation – Jim Clark .....707-445-8311  
Eductn/Schlrshps – Denise Seeger .....707-444-2399  
Membership – Ralph Bucher .....707-499-1247  
eBird Liaison – Rob Fowler .....707-839-3493  
Facebook – Cindy Moyer .....707-822-1886  
Field Trips  
– Janelle Chojnacki .....janelle.choj@gmail.com  
NEC Representative – CJ Ralph .....707-822-2015  
Programs – Harriet Hill .....707-267-4055  
Publications – CJ Ralph .....707-822-2015  
Publicity – Denise Seeger .....707-444-2399  
Website – Susan Penn .....707-672-3346

## THE SANDPIPER: Editor, Layout, & Design

– Gisèle Albertine .....giseleandco@gmail.com  
– Proofreader/Copyeditor .....Pia Gabriel

Historian – Gary Friedrichsen .....707-822-6543  
RRAS Web Page .....www.rras.org  
RRAS Listserve .....groups.io/g/rras

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## (Condors return – cont. from previous page)

*TWC:* Condors are largely, very social birds, and establish a clear hierarchy, so they're pretty comfortable looking to the older bird as their leader, which is ideal. They've also been working out their own hierarchy both through play and preening, and knocking each other off the roosts, the way they would naturally. They are all healthy - about 21 lbs. each, and feeding well. We are going to need to monitor them with respect to that behavior, seeing how they interact with external birds like Turkey Vultures and ravens. We've been looking for the right time period to release them, where the weather conditions are correct, and where we can also release them into Turkey Vulture and Common Raven flocks outside the facility. If they can interact with these wild flocks, it will give them the comfort level they need to feel free to leave the pen. Before releases we need



Above: Mentor bird #746 (center) who was brought in to teach the younger condors and help them acclimatize. A0, the only female, is on the right. Photo by Yurok Public Relations manager, Matt Mais.

## President's Column

*By Gail Kenny*



Over 650 school children – more than twice the number that participated last year – pulled out paints, pencils, pastels, or paste to enter the 19th Annual Student Bird

Art Contest. The contest is coordinated by Sue Leskiw, and cosponsored by Redwood Region Audubon Society and Friends of the Arcata Marsh.

The contest is held in association with mid-April's Godwit Days Spring Migration Bird Festival in Arcata. This year, since a slimmed-down, hybrid festival did not have a presence at the Arcata Community Center, we were unable to post all the entries for public viewing. But, after two years of COVID cancellation, the contest did return to having an in-person awards ceremony, held at the Arcata Marsh outdoor amphitheater. Copies of 2022's cash prize and honorable mention winning artwork will be displayed at the Arcata Marsh Interpretive Center during

May and June. Public viewing is possible Tuesdays through Sundays between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. A downloadable booklet containing the artwork and photos from the awards ceremony are posted at [rras.org](http://rras.org), [godwitdays.org](http://godwitdays.org), and [arcatamarshfriends.org](http://arcatamarshfriends.org).

Some \$600 was awarded: 38 monetary prizes plus 35 honorable mentions.

A sample of the student artwork submitted is shown here, but please view all entries and a list of the winners on our website at [www.rras.org](http://www.rras.org).

Above right: Osprey, by Ram Virnave. First Place, Grades 8-9: Academy of the Redwoods.

Right: Belted Kingfisher, by Summer Kennard. Third Place, Grade 6, Alder Grove Charter.



to find the spot where all those things intersect. They are doing really well, they are beautiful and glossy and they obviously have affection for each other which you can see when watching them preening each other, and huddling closely. They've got a strong bond which is going to be a support for them as the first cohort becomes wild and free.

*Editor:* I don't know if you're able to be there often enough to tell, but are you noticing any personalities?

*TWC:* I'm not able to be there as much as I'd like – I'm often stuck at my desk. But I'm clearing my calendar tomorrow to go up there and hang out with them. I have been watching them from afar, but our crew is watching them every day and taking notes about how their personalities are developing. A3 seems to be the most dominant of the flock, and A0, which is our only female, seems to be the least dominant. There is a range of timidity and friendliness amongst them.

*Editor:* Is it typical for the males to be dominant or larger, or is it just an individual trait?

*TWC:* I get the impression that the males tend to be more dominant, but I'm not going to say that's 100% the case. There's a lot of overlap in size, you can tell just by looking at them. Our female is the smaller of our birds but that's not necessarily always the case.

I'm actually hoping to spend this upcoming time with them so I can pick their names, or their nicknames, as we say. We believe that the animals speak to each other so

we feel that they probably have their own names for each other. But it's also part of Yurok culture that as you become an adult, you receive a new name, which would have served as an adult name back in the day. So, after talking with my Culture Committee, even though the birds have their own names, we will still be providing them with nicknames as we bring them into our community so we can establish that kind of relationship with them as members of our community.

*\*Editor's Note:* Following the release of the first two condors, Tiana shared; "A3 was the first bird out and we have named him; "Poy'-we-son." It means, "the one who goes ahead first," but also was the traditional name of headmen of our villages, a well-respected individual who helped manage and lead the village.

"We have named A2, the second bird to leave; Nes-kew-chokw' which means, "He returns" or "He arrives" and represents the overall return of prey-go-neesh to our home, and this part of their historical range."

*Editor:* So, you have a crew at the holding facility, do they come every day to monitor the birds?

*TWC:* Yes, we've got our two lead biologists; Chris West, who is our Condor Program manager, and Patrick Myers, our lead field biologist, and they have a split shift over the week, so all the days and nights are covered. We also have four interns, so there is someone with the birds 24/7.

*Editor:* Are the interns from the Yurok tribe or from Fish and Wildlife, or NPS, or a mixture of all of these?

*TWC:* We have a collaboration with the [Great Basin Institute](http://GreatBasinInstitute.org), who help some members of the California Condor Recovery Program by providing interns, and they've got the additional partnership with AmeriCorps. Between money that we're bringing for stipends and insurance, and an educational stipend that AmeriCorps can provide, along with free housing which the Park is providing, they're pretty well covered and can live comfortably which a lot of wildlife interns don't necessarily get to do when first starting out!

*Editor:* What an opportunity, and an incentive it must be to start with an internship like this!

*(Continued on next page)*

**(Condors return – continued from previous page)**

*TWC:* Definitely, and they've been an amazing help, both with the finalizing of building the facility, and obviously this level of monitoring would have been impossible without them. They're a great group.



Above: Tiana (left), lead field biologist Patrick Myers (center), and Condor Program manager Chris West applying a transmitter and tag to one of the juveniles.

*Editor:* When you release them, will you do it at the flight pen facility?

*TWC:* Yes, it will be done from the facility. The facility is set up with a main flight pen, an observation room where we observe them and do any handling, and a double-door trap where you can put a carcass inside to lure select birds in. Once you've got the birds that you want in there, you close the door from the flight pen and when you're ready, pull open the door to the outside.

And that works in reverse too if we need to recapture our birds for any reason. We will be doing what's called a "soft release." We will identify the first two birds to be let out, which will likely be the most dominant birds, and get them into that double door trap, and when they're ready, let them go. It's our hope that a Turkey Vulture flock will be waiting outside the flight pen so they can walk right into that.

*Editor:* Your article in the October issue of *The Sandpiper* discussed this, but do you want to talk a little bit more about the significance of condors to the Yurok Tribe? I imagine there must be some big reactions locally from Tribal members, now this is actually happening.

*TWC:* It's been incredible! We've been saying for years, "We're almost there!" Now we're there! We've been blessed to have the opportunity to bring out a lot of the elders, who are particularly close to condors, to actually meet these birds. Actually, one of our ceremonial singers came out and sang for them. We also had another elder visit and provide teachings, which will also be used for video recordings, about what it means to be bringing condors home and he spoke that day as well. I was very glad to bring out members of our Tribal Task Force, the panel of elders who originally made the decision to bring condors home. Many have now passed but I was able to bring out a lot of those remaining, to meet the birds. The joy that they expressed was incredible for me. It was really beautiful and energizing, and carried me through this last bit of craziness!

*Editor:* How about younger members of the Tribe? I've worked with kids on and off for a lot of my life and I know that sometimes it's hard to engage them, but is it engaging any of your youth?

*TWC:* Yes! We've been working to keep the youth engaged, almost since the beginning. I am the primary lead Tribal biologist within our Wildlife Department so I do a lot of youth outreach; teaching them about biology, teaching about our cultural connections, and what it means to be World Renewal People. All of which goes hand-in-hand with condor restoration.

I usually give one or two presentations per month, and not only for Yurok youth. For example, I'll shortly be talking with Hupa second graders. We've also had the opportunity to bring out particular youth to meet the birds, youth who come from ceremonial families. Prey-go-neesh plays a principal role in the Yurok creation story and features prominently in the Tribe's White Deerskin, and Jump dances. These youth will be inheriting these ceremonies. I also got to take my three-year-old daughter out and she was super good. She was so quiet, but so excited! She loves condors and was telling everybody in the days leading up to it, "I'm going to see condors!" It's been awesome knowing she will grow up with condors!

*Editor:* I have received a few questions from other people and some of them regarded concerns with potential problems the birds could have surviving once released, such as poaching or hunters accidentally killing the wrong bird, and lead poisoning from bullets in game the birds eat. Northcoast Environmental Center (NEC) director, and EcoNews

editor, Caroline Griffith, noted that the NEC recently supported legislation that would have banned lead ammunition nationwide. Unfortunately, it failed, and she would like to know what you suggest we can do, going forward, to protect carrion-eaters and predator birds.

*TWC:* In terms of wrongful shooting, unfortunately that is a risk. There have definitely been condors who were shot in the past, at least one person claiming they thought it was a Turkey Vulture – of course it's also illegal to shoot a Turkey Vulture. I do think that there's a lot of community excitement about this though, and this project is being done in a way so there's not a lot of negativity about it in the region. I have no expectations that it will be a problem, but we will be monitoring the birds by satellite transmitter and out in the field, trying to get views of them using our radio transmitters. All of our birds' satellite transmitters have a mortality signal on them so we will know if something goes wrong. That doesn't necessarily mean they're dead, but they could be sick or injured so we would know to go find the bird. We will be monitoring them intently to provide the best protection that's possible. I have a general good faith in humanity, but in case of a problem we are prepared to do the best we can for the birds.

As to the lead ammunition issue, it stills remains a problem for condors in the wild. It's actually the cause of about 50% of mortality in wild birds. In our own assessments with Turkey Vultures, we found blood contamination in about one in four of the birds. This level is lower than anywhere else studied in California, but it's definitely a problem. I'm hoping that our relatively low population here means it will be *less* of a problem than elsewhere. Either way, we are prepared and have a strong support network. Sequoia Zoo is building a condor care center which will be specifically for the triage and care of birds either for direct care, or for transport for more intensive care at one of the other treatment facilities.

And of course, our outreach in the community is going to continue. The non-lead ammunition sales that are happening are great but it's going to be ongoing work with the hunting community to explain why this is an issue and connect with their conservation ethic, which is strong in many hunters. Once it's been explained to them, we hope they can make their own resolution to transition to all non-lead ammunition.



Above: Tiana & Chris in early days, conducting their condor preparation studies by sampling a Turkey Vulture, in 2009, Kneeland, CA.

*Editor:* So, you've got the first cohort of condors here. Do you plan on having a gap period between when this first group of birds are released to see how they do, or are you going to try and bring the next cohort up right away?

*TWC:* I think we're going to get the next cohort up here as soon as we can. We are releasing the first birds in the spring because we couldn't get the facility completed before then. More typically, birds are released in the fall. We are hoping to have our next cohort allocated to us in August of this year, in preparation for being released in the fall of 2022. As I understand it, the California Condor Recovery Program (CCRP), manages where all the birds go. Every bird is genetically documented and chosen for a specific site. We think we will be allocated another four birds again this year, but the last I heard, they haven't figured out which birds are going where, yet. If it isn't this fall, it will be the fall of 2023 when we receive our next cohort.

*Editor:* Is there more than one facility releasing and readying condors for release?

*TWC:* Yes, there are all kinds of groups that are part of the CCRP. There's the Ventana Wildlife Society, Pinnacles National Park, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Peregrine Fund in the Arizona/Utah area, to name a few, as well as a site in Mexico that's co-managed with the Mexican government. There are also all the breeding facilities where the young birds come from and all the geneticists who are in charge of lineages and of making these determinations. It's quite complex!

*(Continued on next page)*

**(Condors return – continued from previous page)**

**Editor:** Truly! Is there anything else you want to share?

**TWC:** Two of our birds, A0 our female, and A1 - who had a faulty transmitter – won't be released in the first set. We will make sure that those birds who are released integrate well with their environment before releasing more birds and then continue to monitor them as they figure out exactly how it is to be a wild condor.

We are doing most of our updates on the Yurok Tribe's website and Facebook page and that's where our condor webcam is accessible – many thanks to California State Parks for providing their expertise on setting that up.

We will pre-announce all releases, and be doing livestream events of them on Facebook. Our public relations manager, Matt Mais, along with other individuals from the Tribe, will be sharing some prerecorded videos on the release days, which tell the condor story interspersed with discussion about what's happening as it occurs live. In other soft releases it can take as long as a week for the birds to decide to leave the facility. But our birds are very active and excited, I don't think they're going to take too long to head out!

**(Editor's Note:** Both A3 and A2's release can be viewed on the Yurok Tribe's Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/TheYurokTribe](http://www.facebook.com/TheYurokTribe) – and in fact both birds did not even stop to check out the carcass that had been laid outside the flight pen's double-door trap, but flew directly out, and up into the skies – no hesitation!

**Editor:** When I was volunteering at [Humboldt Wildlife Care Center](http://HumboldtWildlifeCareCenter.org) (HWCC), on Bayside, in Arcata, where they rescue and rehabilitate injured and orphaned animals including a lot of birds, I did observe some hesitation in birds who were being released. It must cause some anxiety to suddenly have this option of freedom, and in this case, to leave their family behind.

**TWC:** A part of the reason we have a mentor bird is because we want those released to be free, but we also want to keep them honed in, initially, to our facility, through which we will continue to manage them. We will do bi-annual captures to make sure they are doing well. So, we will continue to bait, not so much to feed them, although that might be a part of it especially in the early days, but to keep them really cued in to home, so we can keep a close eye on them. They will also stay cued in because the mentor bird will be there and they'll sit on top of the facility and want to hang out with him. That won't last forever, but it will give them enough time to be close to home where it's relatively safe. Then they can figure out what they're doing – because they've never flown in the wild before – before they really take off and start expanding their range.

**Editor:** Do you know how big their range is?

**TWC:** The birds are between two and three years old now and will come of breeding age at about 6-8 years old. Once they know what they are doing and are well established, they will pick a territory. But they'll definitely start expanding before then, probably in their first year. They will have a range of about 100 miles per day but if they are just trying to get from A to B, they can fly as much as 200 miles in a day. There have been birds who flew from Arizona to Idaho on a whim to see what's up, and then came right back. Our birds will probably stick a little bit closer to home at first, but once they are well established, they'll start expanding their range, using the coast lines, the mountain ranges and riverways to spread out across the North Coast. •



**UPDATE from Tiana:**

“(Since their release, the birds are) doing great. A3 has definitely been the more adventurous of the two, running everyone around, but then ended up hunkered in a tree through some unexpectedly heavy rain and wind, but on the move again (now in light snow, which is nuts for May). A2 has been taking a more cautious approach, mostly hanging out at the facility, but taking test flights daily. He comes back for the food, and to visit.”

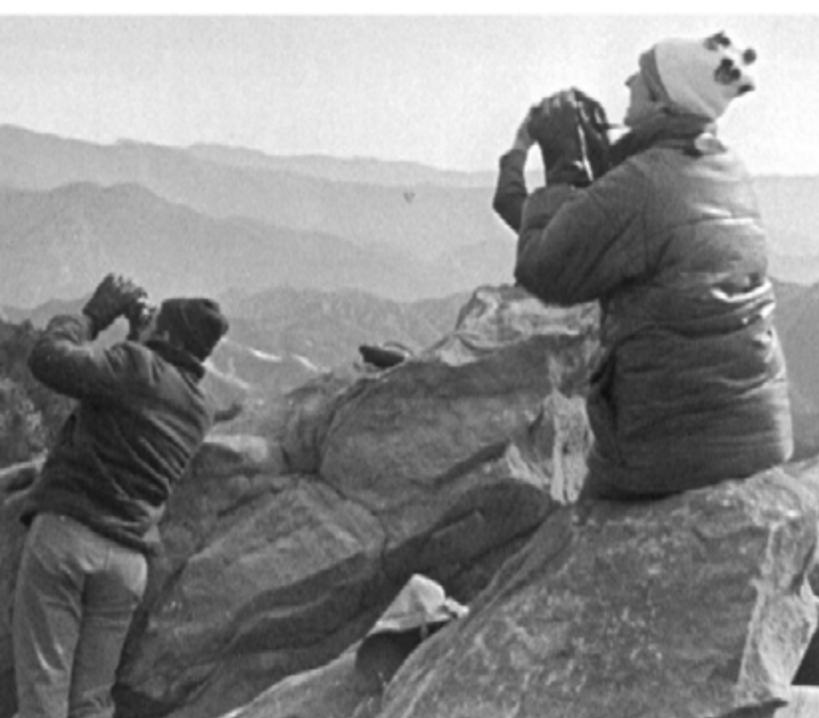
\*To view the release of A3 and A2, see the Yurok Tribe's Facebook page at [facebook.com/TheYurokTribe](http://facebook.com/TheYurokTribe), or go to their website at [www.yuroktribe.org/](http://www.yuroktribe.org/) and look under Wildlife Department.



\*See Tiana's article on condors in the October 2021 issue of *The Sandpiper* by visiting the RRAS website at [rras.org](http://rras.org) and looking under Newsletter; Previous Sandpipers.



Top: A3 flies out of his pen, right over the carcass without stopping for food! (Note A2, on the far right of photo, is thinking about heading towards the exit.) Above left and above right: A2 follows A3 to freedom. All photos by Matt Mais.



Left: Back in 1976, biologist Jan Hamber (R) scans for condors on a mountain ridge near the site of the former West Big Pine Lookout, courtesy of Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

**Reprinted from the National Audubon Society, fall 2020, by John Moir:**

On an April evening in 1987, Jan Hamber stepped into a phone booth at a gas station a hundred miles northwest of Los Angeles, debating whether to place the most consequential call of her career. Her head said yes; her heart said no. Her own remarkable journey in becoming a condor biologist at times seemed implausible... In the mid-20th century, when Hamber began her decades-long push to break into the field, women biologists were as rare as condors. “In those days women were expected to be homemakers or possibly teachers or nurses,” she says. “No one imagined we could be out tramping around with backpacks.”

In 1984 after a seemingly healthy condor dropped dead, a necropsy revealed a tiny lead-bullet fragment in its intestinal tract. Here at last was an explanation for the high mortality rate. A second bird died from lead poisoning, and then, in 1986, the female of the Santa Barbara Pair became desperately ill and tested positive for lead. “Watching her die was horrible,” Hamber says. Her death changed the direction of the program. To protect the last wild condors from lead poisoning and preserve genetic diversity, the team decided to try to capture the remaining birds.

Hamber had spent the day in nearby wilderness tracking the last wild California Condor, AC9 (Adult Condor 9). The untested, captive-breeding plans represented the species' final hope, and Hamber understood that with so few birds left, every one counted. But trapping AC9 would mean that for the first time in tens of thousands of years, North American skies would be devoid of condors. By taking AC9 into captivity, they weren't just trapping an individual bird – they were capturing an entire species. This last wild condor, a bird Hamber had watched from birth, a magnificent creature that could fly 150 miles in a day with hardly a wing flap, now huddled in a pet carrier. Later Hamber wrote up her field notes, ending with three short sentences: 10:10, cannon fired. AC9 caught. The end. Then she put her head in her hands and let the sorrow wash over her. At age 90, Hamber is still devoted to preserving the iconic bird, now as manager of the Condor Archives, a unique repository of condor information housed in the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. (For full article on Jan Hamber, and some background on the beginnings of condor recovery, see [www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2020/this-bird-lives-because-they-never-quit](http://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2020/this-bird-lives-because-they-never-quit).)