

OCTOBER 11, 2004

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Tempting trash foils wild condor breeding effort

Filled with bottle caps and metal, chicks die in nest

By Phil McKenna  
Special to The Chronicle

Allan Mee, a wildlife biologist with the San Diego Zoo, is watching a wild condor chick through a spotting scope at a remote viewing area in the backcountry of Ventura County.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed," Mee said with guarded optimism.

Glass shards and metal scraps have killed or threatened two of the three condor chicks born this year in the wild. The third — the young bird Mee kept an eye on late last week — is only days away from becoming the first wild condor fledgling in California in 20 years.

While the captive release program continues to expand — combined releases at Pinnacles National Monument and in Big Sur this fall will mark the largest send-off in California since condor reintroductions began in 1992 — breeding in the wild is still stuck in the nest cave.

For the past three years, wild hatchlings have died after ingesting large amounts of trash. Last month, a chick brought in with a broken wing was found with a record 35 bottle caps in its stomach.

In 2002, all three chicks that hatched in California died about a month shy of their anticipated fledge dates. While cause of death was unknown

for two of the birds, the third died of zinc poisoning after ingesting electrical fixtures, screws, and washers coated with the heavy metal.

In 2003, the state's only wild chick exhibited stunted growth after ingesting large amounts of trash, including an 18-inch rag, and had to be euthanized after jagged glass shards perforated its stomach, causing respiratory damage resulting in pneumonia.

This summer, one of the three wild chicks in California was found dead with 4 ounces of trash in its stomach. The chick that consumed 35 bottle caps — which will be released once its wing heals — had close to a pound of trash surgically removed.

"It's a huge problem," Mee said. "You can pump out as many captive-bred chicks as you want, but if you can't get them to reproduce in the wild, the rest is inconsequential."

Biologists are unsure why condor parents are feeding trash to their young.

One theory is that birds are mistaking small bits of trash for pieces of bone, an essential source of calcium for condors. As a result, biologists began placing supplemental bone chips at feeding sites. But there have been mixed results.

"The parents still feed on bottle caps and junk, even though bone

fragments are available," says Jesse Grantham, interim coordinator of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service condor recovery program.

In addition to providing calcium, biologists are cleaning up the birds' environment. When an egg is laid, biologists sift the cave floor to remove any bits of trash that may already be in the nest.

The worst trash areas, including pads around oil derricks near the condor release site at Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge, have been cleaned up.

Roads in nearby Angeles National Forest, with pullouts known to attract late-night partiers who leave broken bottles, have been shut down.

Michael Wallace, leader of the Fish and Wildlife California Condor Recovery Team, believes the birds still view areas with trash as giant boneyards.

"They already have an image of where to go for bones, and it's the trash heaps. We have to replace that with an appropriate search image," Wallace says, noting it may take time to retrain birds that have already keyed in on garbage.

Others believe that birds are ingesting trash because they are bored.

For the past 12 years, biologists have

provided supplemental food to keep condors from finding and feeding on “wild” carcasses that may contain lead ammunition. While the food subsidies have helped mitigate incidents of lead poisoning, they also keep the scavengers from having to search for food.

“The birds have a lot of free time, and their natural curiosities are getting them in trouble,” Grantham said. “If we didn’t have to provide food all the time, they would have less time to pick around at trash.”

Despite the intensive food drops, five condors have died and 33 others have required emergency blood treatment in the past seven years after ingesting lead.

“If this (wild) chick is successful, it would show that we are on the right road and can again focus on lead, which is the real issue,” Grantham said.

While government agencies involved in condor reintroductions have shied away from the issue, the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental advocacy group, is now calling for a ban on the use of lead ammunition within the condors’ range.

The group is hosting a meeting in San Francisco on Friday to discuss different strategies, including litigation, to achieve a ban.

Meanwhile, biologists at Pinnacles National Monument are getting ready for their second release of captive reared birds, three young California condors who were born at the Los Angeles Zoo and held in a flight pen at Pinnacles since mid-May. After the first release last December, biologists had to sleep on the ground around the condors each night for two weeks until the birds

learned to roost in trees, where they are safe from predation.

This spring, one of the birds had to be recaptured and held indefinitely after approaching people. Just last week, two of the free-flying condors landed on power poles, forcing biologists to temporarily trap the errant birds and postpone a release scheduled for this Friday by two weeks.

“Even with the power pole issue, I’m really encouraged by the success of the birds this first year,” says Pinnacles biologist Rebecca Leonard. “This coming year should be much smoother, now that there are older birds out there to lead the way.”

By the end of November, a total of 12 captive-reared birds will have been returned to the wild in Central California this fall by the National Park Service and Ventana Wilderness Society.

“The numbers of birds and their range in the wild continue to increase each year,” said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of Ventana Wilderness Society. “We’re really making a tremendous amount of progress.”

There are now 106 condors flying free over California, Arizona and northern Mexico. An additional 138 birds are held in captive breeding centers.

Last year, an Arizona condor was the first to fledge in the wild since reintroductions began, and there are two more wild chicks in the Grand Canyon region this year that are about to fledge.

On Saturday, this year’s last remaining wild chick in California — the chick in Ventura County

wilderness — completed its six-month brooding period, the average time a condor spends in the nest before fledging and taking to the sky.

Mee, who has been monitoring the bird’s parents since December, is certain the chick has garbage in it.

“I’d stake my life on it,” said Mee, who has been watching the chick every day since August with San Diego Zoo research assistant Jennie Sinclair. This chick’s mother “has been picking at trash more than any other bird.”

Although trash has claimed the lives of at least two of California’s wild chicks, there isn’t always a direct relationship between garbage and bird deaths. The chick found earlier this year with a pound of trash in its stomach was a healthy bird with no signs of stunted growth or poisoning.

“I don’t think there is enough evidence at this point to say that trash is a limiting factor,” said Fish and Wildlife biologist Richard Posey. “It’s something we’ll have to continue to deal with, but I’m optimistic that reproduction in the future will be successful in spite of trash.”