



Fight of the Condors

Can the giant birds survive Tejon Ranch development?

by SUSAN ZAKIN

FEBRUARY 18 - 24, 2005

The road to the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge is not for the faint of stomach. It winds and unwinds up the steep mountains of the Los Padres National Forest, through a landscape of oil rigs and dirt roads. Cleaved from the hillsides, the roads have the shock value of scarification on the face of a West African tribesman.

The woman driving the Ford Bronco is Denise Stockton. She works for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, telling the public, and reporters, about California condors. Her husband, Mike, is one of the biologists who tend to condors, the largest birds in North America. Condors were practically extinct in the 1980s; their reintroduction in California and Arizona has cost the American taxpayers \$35 million so far. Yet the condor's future is far from assured.

Denise and Mike Stockton have raised a couple of kids together. They talk about the condors as if they are rambunctious teenagers with personalities, even though the birds' names sound like machine guns or superviruses. Two years ago, on nearby Tejon Ranch, a hunter killed one of the last condors born in the wild, and nobody seemed any less grief-stricken because the bird's name was AC-8.

Is that a plane? I ask uncertainly, pointing to what looks like a glider passing over the hills.

Denise laughs. You're getting to see a condor, she says.

We follow the silhouette along a ridge, and there they are, unmistakable, half a dozen enormous black birds, jointed and angular like skeletons made visible. With white bands on the underside of their wings, the condors have markings similar to turkey vultures. Genetically they are closer to storks, but visually they resemble nothing so much as pterodactyls. When they fly, condors change the horizon; they inhabit it. These birds make the Western sky look smaller.

It's what's under the sky that's the problem. Condors forage along the steep hillsides and shadow the valleys of 277,000-acre Tejon Ranch. Like the condor, the enormous, primeval-looking ranch is a remnant of pre-suburban California. But Tejon is on the fast track to the 21st century: Developers are planning the single largest housing development in Los Angeles County history here. The project hasn't been approved yet, but it's hard to imagine anyone powerful enough to stop construction of a brand-new city worth a staggering \$57 billion in

today's dollars. That's enough to make the \$35 million spent on condor reintroduction so far look like birdseed. Biologists fear that development on Tejon Ranch, the project now on the boards, is likely to be just the beginning will create a domino effect of sprawling settlement on one of the last frontiers of rural California. This can't be good for the condor, not even with a proposed third of the ranch possibly made off-limits to developers, or for the regions small-town way of life, something that's equally endangered in 21st-century America.

If the California condor is an icon, so is Tejon Ranch. At 432 square miles, it is the largest piece of privately owned land in California: one-third the size of Rhode Island, 12 times the size of Manhattan, almost as huge as the entire city of Los Angeles . The ranch is a blank spot on the map circled by Bakersfield, the Los Padres National Forest, the high desert of the Antelope Valley, the coastal ranges and the southern Sierra. With all these dramatically different landscapes converging, it's not surprising that the region contains a plethora of politically inconvenient (read: endangered or threatened) plant and animal species, from the blunt-nosed leopard lizard to the Mexican flannel bush. It's even less surprising that it's a migratory route for deer, mountain lions, bobcats and other large animals.

The ranch is also a microcosm, albeit a big one, of the state's human history, which helps explain why it is still in one piece. Like most of the large ranches in Southern California, Tejon was once a Spanish land grant. In 1912, three prominent California businessmen bought Tejon: Los Angeles Times publisher Harry Chandler; Moses Sherman, the developer of Sherman Oaks; and another real estate developer named Arnold Haskell.

Throughout it's various incarnations, Tejon has remained a working cattle ranch and a farming operation, producing the usual assortment of California commodities. Now, in its most recent incarnation, Tejon itself is a commodity.

In 1997, Third Avenue Management, a New York based investment firm that manages mutual funds, bought about a third of the shares of Tejon Ranch, which had been a publicly traded company for generations. Third Avenue is known for buying stock in companies on the edge of disaster to capitalize on their real estate holdings; the firm recently snapped up troubled Kmart because of the chains valuable locations. On Wall Street, firms like Third Avenue are called vulture investors.

Even before Third Avenue stepped in, Tejon's board of directors clearly had plans to squeeze more revenue out of the ranch. In the mid-90s they hired a CEO named Bob Stine, a man with a track record in San Diego real estate development. The ranch straddles Kern and Los Angeles counties, so Stine knew he'd have two county governments to face if he wanted to turn the ranch from a playground for the likes of Otis Chandler into the brave new world of postmillennial suburban California. Stine moved to Bakersfield and proceeded to hire from within L.A. and Kern county government, that is.

Barry Zoeller, the ranch's PR man, is the former executive director of the Kern County Board of Trade. Joe Drew, Tejon's vice president in charge of commercial and industrial development, is a former Kern

County administrator and a former chief of the Los Angeles MTA who resigned after questions were raised about contracts awarded to a low-rated bidder.

With this kind of high-priced access, and Kern County's general pro-growth attitude, Stine neutralized opposition from the north. But Los Angeles politicians are more likely to make noise about out-of-control urban sprawl. Even if noise is often all they make, noise causes delays and delays cost money. By the late 90s, the development of Tejon Ranch was already controversial. The grand plan includes a 1,450-acre industrial park, an upscale development around Tejon Lake called Mountain Village, and the 23,000-home Centennial project, lets face it a city, on nearly 12,000 acres in one of the ranch's valleys. Centennial alone will bring in an estimated 70,000 new residents, tripling the population in this rural region of national forests and backwoods mountain towns. It's hard to believe that small towns still exist within 100 miles of Hollywood, but in towns like Frazier Park, a dog can fall asleep on Main Street after 10 p.m. and have a damn good chance of waking up alive the next morning.

Tejon Ranch's headquarters are just off Interstate 5, but you can't see the building from the highway. Inside, everything has that Ralph Lauren turquoise-and-denim, vaguely distressed look: leather couches, lots of stone, fireplaces. Tejon CEO Bob Stine is wearing cowboy boots, but he's a Jersey boy, and his MBA comes from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, a credential that must have reassured the New York investors.

Bob Stine's job is to turn an outdoor museum into a cash register, and so far, that hasn't happened. A natural-gas power plant is slated to come on line in a few months, but only after one of Tejon's partners a company called Enron, you may have heard of it?, ran into a spot of trouble. Completion of Tejon's industrial park has been delayed for almost two years after a lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups raised concerns over the air pollution increased truck traffic would bring to the already afflicted Central Valley.

As if that wasn't enough, yet another salvo was fired just over a year ago, this one from an unexpected quarter. In October 2003, Rear Admiral J.L. Betancourt, the commander of the Southwest region of the U.S. Navy, wrote a letter to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger expressing his concern that development at Tejon would interfere with crucial training missions in the airspace above the ranch. Betancourt has since backed off, saying the development and military training exercises could coexist for now. But he reserves the right to change his mind should ranch development eventually conflict with military concerns.

Tejon Ranch lost \$2.9 million in 2003, only the second year in the past decade the ranch has landed in the red. A Tejon spokesperson attributed the loss to real estate and a drop in the price of pecans.

Then there's the condor. When Stine realized that lawsuits were a certainty, he started working with the Trust for Public Land, a San Francisco based group that brokers conservation land deals as a middleman between government agencies and private landholders. If the deal goes through, 100,000 acres of Tejon Ranch will be placed off-

limits to development in an effort to assure the condor will be able to use its traditional foraging grounds. Cynics suggest that the money from the land deal which at an average of \$5,000 an acre would be a whopping half a billion dollars will bankroll Tejon's real estate development.

Bob Stine denies that a cash shortfall is the motivation for preserving the 100,000 acres. The people saying that can't read a balance sheet, Stine says. We've got \$75 million in cash, and our partners in Centennial are three out of four of the largest homebuilders in California.

While the Tejon CEO recites old shibboleths about the sacredness of private-property rights proving that his cowboyishness isn't confined to his boots when it comes to the actual bricks and mortar, he's more advanced. The 23,000-home Centennial project will be invisible from the highway. The town will be built in a valley that's already been hammered into dust by cattle grazing. Stine says the ranch is working on establishing a condor preserve of nearly 40,000 acres within the 100,000-acre no-development zone.

Were not a developer who comes in, buys a piece of land and leaves town, Stine says, as we sit in big, comfortable chairs in his office. This is where our assets are. We don't want to harm the place.

If you're looking at deep time, condors are as much a part of this place as the chaparral or the cold that comes when the sun disappears behind Mount Pinos. Ten thousand years ago, California condors flew over both coasts of North America, from British Columbia to Baja and New York to Florida. By the 1930s, the condor was found only in Southern California, and not in very impressive numbers.

For the next 50 years or so, the condors were tracked by a succession of lone scientists hiking into the canyons and high country. Even after the condor was added to the list of endangered species one of the first species to be so protected nobody was sure what was killing the birds off. Some people thought DDT was the culprit; others blamed poachers, or Compound 1080, a pesticide used to kill ground squirrels. Condors are scavengers; they'll eat almost anything, it seems, including bits of plastic. The possibilities were almost unlimited.

In 1978, ornithologists didn't think the condor could hold out much longer. The American Ornithologists Union and the National Audubon Society set up a panel of scientists to devise a plan to save the bird. In 1980, the panel recommended additional research and, if necessary, a captive-breeding program. Audubon successfully lobbied Congress to make the panels blueprint a reality. The most controversial part of the program was the fail-safe mechanism: captive breeding. If the scientists couldn't figure out what was killing the birds, and stop it, they'd capture the condors and breed them in captivity until they could be safely released.

Today that sounds like a modest proposal. But in 1980 it set off a bitter fight between scientists like Noel Snyder, who headed the condor field-research program for the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, and David Brower, the man John McPhee called the archdruid. Brower, the former head of the Sierra Club and founder of Friends of the Earth, argued

that if the condors couldn't survive in the wild, they should be allowed to die with dignity.

The argument wasn't purely philosophical. Brower and his supporters feared that captive breeding would take the condor out of the political game for a decade and sprawl would run rampant in Southern California's condor habitat.

In 1985, the condor's situation grew so dire that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Fish and Game Commission agreed a captive-breeding program was necessary. The Audubon Society balked. While Audubon still supported captive breeding, the organizations' political strategists reportedly shared Brower's concern that capturing the last remaining wild birds would weaken the case for preserving their habitat. It sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a technicality. On January 9, 1986, a judge stopped the field team from capturing any more condors. Nine days later, one of only six remaining wild condors died of lead poisoning.

This proved the most immediate threat to the condors wasn't loss of wilderness, it was lead. Even back in 1980, Snyder suspected that lead shot left behind in carcasses by hunters was killing the condors. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s showed that lead shot was poisoning both Andean condors and zoo-bound vultures. Then, in 1984, when one of the California condors died, Snyder's team determined the cause to be lead poisoning.

The last wild California condor was captured the following year. In 1992, when the first captive-bred condors were released, it was front-page news. The media declared condor reintroduction a success, printed lyrical descriptions of birds soaring in the Grand Canyon, and moved on. For most people, that was the end of the story. But nobody had answered the real question: Can these birds live in the wild?

On Hopper Mountain, half a dozen condors cluster on a windy promontory like a congregation of scarecrows drawn by Edward Gorey. This is where Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have set up a feeding station. Thirteen years after California condors' reintroduction to the wild, humans are still feeding them. If they were left to forage for themselves, they'd be dead.

The condors may be alive, but they aren't exactly thriving. Just over 200 California condors are alive today. A little more than 100 are free in Arizona, California and Baja. Around 30 are in pens, waiting to be released. One hundred thirty-five are in breeding facilities at zoos. Since 1992, only one condor chick born in the wild has survived in California.

Noel Snyder and Dave Clendenen, the biologist who succeeded him as chief of the condor field-research program, are saddened and outraged by what they view as the program's failures.

The wild birds avoided human contact, but captive-bred condors congregate near civilization. They peck at roof tiles and windshield gaskets, and they feed their chicks garbage. Eating plastic can cause birds to die of suffocation, especially the young ones.

They're a caricature of the wild birds, says Clendenen.

Biologists believe the wild birds are the last link to natural condor behavior they teach the young ones how to behave. There is only one wild-born condor living outside a zoo now that AC-8 is dead. Anthony Prieto, a hunter from Ventura who volunteers with the condor-reintroduction program, is particularly distraught over the loss of AC-8.

That bird had thousands of years of knowledge, Prieto says. I couldn't get within a couple of hundred yards, or she'd get fidgety and shed get the other birds nervous. She didn't like people. She was in captivity 14 years, but she never got tame.

Not only are the reintroduced condors fed like pets, but they also require an extraordinary amount of human intervention simply to stay alive. Even with humans providing most of their food, the birds are often recaptured so veterinarians can chelate their blood, injecting a chemical that cleanses the blood of heavy metals to save their lives. In the spring of 2000, three birds in the Arizona flock died of lead poisoning after feeding on carcasses contaminated with lead shot. Nine of the remaining 22 Arizona condors had to be captured and treated. Two years later, another bird in Arizona died of lead poisoning. Nearly half the remaining flock was captured and treated.

One of the most poignant aspects of the shooting death of AC-8 was the fact that she almost died from lead poisoning in 2000. Prieto visited AC-8 after she was recaptured.

They fed her by hand 24/7, it was real touch and go, Prieto recalls. They didn't think she was gonna make it. She couldn't even lift her head.

AC-8 made it. She was re-released on Christmas Eve 2002 and in February a hunter shot her on Tejon Ranch. The ranch wasn't liable for legal action under the federal Endangered Species Act, because the hunter had received information that it was illegal to kill a condor. The hunter claimed he didn't know AC-8 was a condor. But he wasn't visiting the ranch to shoot birds - the hunting event he was attending was called, rather undiplomatically, Pig-O-Rama. He was convicted of lesser charges and walked away with a fine.

Usually it is not hunters but the carrion they leave behind that is the biggest danger to condors. Just a few fragments of a shattered bullet left in a carcass contain enough lead to kill a condor. Yet for two decades the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been too timid to ban lead shot, fearing a backlash from the hunting community.

Finally, on December 16, a coalition of environmentalists, hunters and Native American groups petitioned the California Fish and Game Commission to ban lead shot. The commission turned them down earlier this year, and the issue is likely to land in court. Environmentalists say they are hoping for an eventual nationwide ban on lead shot, which not only affects condors, but golden eagles and vultures.

Lead may be the most immediate threat to the condor's survival, but that doesn't mean David Brower's concerns over the birds habitat were unfounded.

Snyder believes that preserving the condor's historic habitat on Tejon Ranch is crucial if the condor is ever going to breed in sufficient numbers to be removed from the endangered-species list and if the condors are to be truly wild again. The birds range over hundreds of miles, so it's not just the freshly minted city of Centennial that concerns Snyder and other biologists, but the domino effect of future sprawl across the ranch and surrounding area. Still, Snyder says that Tejon Ranch was the central foraging place for condors historically. If Tejon gets developed in a way that's no longer useful for the birds, then you've got a real problem.

The historic relationship between the condor and the ranch hasn't been lost on Bob Stine, or his predecessors. In 1997, Tejon Ranch brought a lawsuit to notch down protection for the condor and to stop condors from being reintroduced on a private wildlife preserve. If condors were released on the Wind Wolves Preserve adjacent to the ranch, they were almost certain to show up on Tejon Ranch. Tejon executives were shocked when biologists told them the condors were already using the ranch, where they had nested and roosted for thousands of years even before the Chandlers arrived.

Tejon settled the case with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency agreed, in principle, to work with Tejon on a plan that would indemnify the company from legal action if its actions happened to kill or harm a condor. The details of the deal are being hammered out now. Rick Farris of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says it's up to the public to make their views known.

Adam Keats, a lawyer with the Center for Biological Diversity, says his aggressively litigious environmental group is going to make its views known by suing Tejon Ranch not to stop development, he insists, but to stop the ranch from killing condors. With condor numbers so low, and the dubious achievements of the reintroduction program, Keats believes that the death of even a single condor will jeopardize the species' survival.

Mountain Village [the ranchette development around Tejon Lake] is dreadful, Keats says. I think that would have an extraordinary impact on the condor. A lot of the Centennial flatland development could have an impact, even if condors are not prone to using flatlands. (Condors prefer hillsides and mountains, because the updrafts help them rise from the ground.)

Sticking 75,000 people who are just itching to get out of their hermetically sealed town and run up into the hillsides is bound to have a negative impact on the condor, Keats says. I think it's a very bad idea.

Even if ticky-tacky houses are'nt planted right up on the hills where the condors forage, the plastic trash left by 70,000 people in the flatlands is likely to kill condors and there are only 20 in Southern California. What's more, nobody knows what Tejon plans for the future. Bob Stine once promised the ranch would develop only 5 percent of its

land in the next 25 years, but lately he's been hedging. The reality is nobody knows what Tejon plans for the future. Environmentalists fear that Tejon's strategy is to piecemeal development so the cumulative effects of developing the ranch don't receive scrutiny. One might dismiss this as fearmongering, but apparently the military shares their concerns. Stine persuaded Rear Admiral Betancourt to back off on opposition to the Centennial development, but in an October 7, 2004, follow-up letter to Stine, Betancourt warned that future developments would be scrutinized carefully. He reiterated his concerns over the limited availability of current information regarding development plans and cumulative impacts for the region.

After receiving Betancourt's first letter back in 2003, Schwarzenegger staffers reportedly talked about a comprehensive planning process for the ranch. This could be the best way to preserve the condor and the other rare species in the Tejon region as the inevitable development turns the ranch and its surroundings into a Monopoly board. But according to sources close to the administration, it isn't being talked about much lately.

Meanwhile, Stine isn't giving away anything for free. The ranch has no plans to do more rigorous hunter education, despite the death of AC-8, he says. Stine also says the ranch won't ban lead shot even though lead shot is the leading cause of condor mortality. Hunters are notoriously resistant to change, and despite the ready availability of affordable alternatives to lead shot, the ranch doesn't want to lose any possible competitive advantage, since about 8 percent just under \$2 million of its annual revenue comes from hunting.

If Tejon Ranch is reined in, it's likely to be by environmental groups like the Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council and by a few individuals like Lloyd Wiens. He is one of the few people around who can say he had an up-close-and-personal experience with a wild condor, back when the birds were feeding themselves and flying around without radio transmitters or name tags.

Wiens was clearing brush at a campground under the summit of Mount Pinos when he heard a sound like a jet whistling through the trees. Not so strange, maybe, except the sound kept getting louder, as if the jet was about to crash. When he looked up, he saw two California condors, their 9-foot wingspans shadowing the ground like dark angels. The birds flew so low, it felt as though they passed within inches of his head.

They were looking right at me, Wiens says wryly. I was in pretty low spirits at the time, so it was an occurrence I'll always remember.

That was 15 years ago. Now Wiens, a former Midwestern farm boy with a Ph.D. in philosophy who calls himself a Republican, conservative type of guy, is getting his neighbors riled up, and publishing exposés of alleged Tejon misdeeds on his Internet site.

Some people just don't like change. When Wiens moved to Frazier Park in 1979, it was a scruffy mountain town with a population of less than 3,000. Like Cheers, it was a place where everyone knew your name and probably a whole lot of other things about you. There was no movie theater, no mall, no Wal-Mart, no Walgreens. There wasn't even a supermarket. Every bit of this is still true. Frazier Park and the

surrounding towns of Lake of the Woods, Pinon Pines, Gorman and Lebec (as in the kitschy, Grapevine-issue Where the Heck Is Lebec? bumper stickers) are home to less than 15,000 people.

Wiens and others say that Tejon Ranch's Centennial development, which lies at the edge of the Antelope Valley, will spur growth along Route 138, the freeway that leads to Palmdale, creating a sprawl belt in what is probably the closest rural area to Los Angeles. This is leapfrog development at its most stark miles of national forests separate Tejon from Los Angeles so daily commuting would be brutal if not impossible. Yet people will, no doubt, move there.

We've already had two new developments proposed since Tejon sent its proposal to the planning commission, Wiens says. This place was a well-kept secret.

Even if Tejon scales back its plans, the small-town atmosphere of Frazier Park, where Wiens works part-time as a high school teacher and football coach, is bound to change. There's only one advantage to development here, he says, grinning. More football players.

After Centennial is built, people might even know where the heck Lebec is.

By then, Wiens says, he'll be ready to retire and do the same thing outdoorsy Californians have been doing since the 1980s: move to Oregon.

When Adam Keats hears this, he laughs. But then he gets serious again. Too bad the condor can't go, too, he says.