California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

CALIFORNIA CONDOR *Gymnogyps californianus*
Family: CATHARTIDAE Order: CICONIIFORMES Class: AVES
B109

Written by: C. Polite
Reviewed by: L. Kiff
Edited by: L. Kiff

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Endangered, permanent resident of the semi-arid, rugged mountain ranges surrounding the southern San Joaquin Valley, including the Coast Ranges from Santa Clara Co. south to Los Angeles Co., the Transverse Ranges, Tehachapi Mts., and southern Sierra Nevada. Forages over wide areas of open rangelands, roosts on cliffs and in large trees and snags. Occurs mostly between sea-level and 2700 m (0-9000 ft), and nests from 610-1372 m (2000-6500 ft). Nonbreeding individuals move north to Kern and Tulare cos. in April, often returning south in September to winter in Tehachapi Mts., Mt. Pinos, and Ventura and Santa Barbara cos. Total population in early 1980's estimated to be fewer than 20, and declining (Ogden 1982). Occurrence in the wild now in question. Two U.S. Forest Service sanctuaries set aside within the Los Padres National Forest, primarily for nesting and roosting protection .

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Strictly a scavenger, eating carrion such as cattle, sheep, deer, and ground squirrel carcasses. Dead cattle have provided the most important food source in recent decades. Requires about 1 kg (2.2 Ib) of food per day. Can convert food to fat rapidly after gorging; thus, can remain for several days without feeding (Wilbur 1978). Searches for food while soaring and gliding. Food must be in open areas to enable landing and take-off (Koford 1953). Often forages over areas 7.3 to 30 km² (2.8 to 11.6 mi²), or larger. May fly 56 km (35 mi), or more, from roost to feeding sites (Koford 1953).

Cover: Traditional roosting sites are ledges or cavities on cliffs. Also uses old-growth Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and snags, in undisturbed areas.

Reproduction: Nests in caves, crevices, behind rock slabs, or on large ledges on high sandstone cliffs. Nest often surrounded by dense brush. A nest is not constructed; egg laid on bare surface. Nesting occurs within the Coast and Transverse Ranges of Ventura and Santa Barbara cos.

Water: Uses water for drinking and bathing.

Pattern: Requires vast expanses of open savannah, grasslands, and foothill chaparral, with cliffs, large trees, and snags for roosting and nesting.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Subadults and nonbreeders often move north March to May to traditional roosts and foraging areas in the southwestern Sierra Nevada, returning south again at the end of summer. Breeding pair remains near nesting area yearlong.

Home Range: No additional data found.

Territory: Territoriality not confirmed at any season. Simultaneous use of nest sites has occurred as close as 0.8 km (0.5 mi) apart; nest defense between adults was not observed (Koford 1953).

Reproduction: Breeds annually, or less often. Courtship observed as early as October. One egg laid February to May. Incubation approximately 59 days, after which young remains in nest for about 5 mo. Young remains dependent on parents for food for several months after begins flying.

Niche: Reduced nesting success in recent decades associated with eggshell thinning, probably caused by presence of DDE in eggshell (Kiff et al. 1979). Golden eagles have been observed attempting to prey on condor chicks (Ogden 1981). Turkey vulture competes with condor for food. Numbers of cattle and other livestock carcasses reduced in recent years because of changes in husbandry practices, including increased salvaging of carcasses.

Comments: Apparently extinct in the wild after 1987. Captive breeding program underway, with plans to reintroduce into the wild in the early 1990's.

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