

California condor chick's flight from nest marks milestone for recovery program

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In a milestone for the recovery of the California condor, a condor chick has hatched in the wild, survived and flown out of its nest at Pinnacles National Park for the first time since the 1890s.

The bird, a female born in April, is not the first chick to be born in the 12 years since condors bred in captivity were re-introduced to the 26,000-acre park, about 80 miles south of San Jose.

But she is the first to survive long enough to leave the nest and begin the path to adulthood, a major step for North America's largest bird as it continues a slow-but-steady path from near extinction.

"It's significant," said Steve Kirkland, a biologist and California condor program coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Self-sustaining reproduction in the wild is the primary goal."

California condors, whose wingspans can reach 9 feet, once ranged from British Columbia to Mexico. But because of habitat loss, hunting and lead poisoning, the majestic birds' population dwindled to just 22 nationwide by 1982. In a desperate gamble to stave off extinction, federal biologists captured all remaining wild condors in 1987 and began breeding them in zoos. The birds' offspring have been gradually released back into the wild.

Today, things are looking up for the condor.

As of Dec. 31, there were 435 California condors in the world, an increase of nearly 20-fold over the past 30 years. Of those, 268 live in the wild, and 167 live in captivity in places where they are bred and hatched, such as the San Diego Zoo.

Wild condors live in Central California, where 82 birds split their time between Big Sur and Pinnacles; in Southern California, mostly around Ventura and Santa Barbara counties; in the Grand Canyon and Utah; and in Baja, Mexico.

Last year, for the first time since the recovery effort began, more condors were born in the wild, 14, than died in the wild, 12. Scientists hope to one day remove the birds from the endangered species list, as has been done with other iconic species such as the bald eagle, gray whale and peregrine falcon.

Condors have successfully been born in the wild, and left the nest, a process known as fledging, in Big Sur, Southern California, Arizona and Baja Mexico. But until last week, it had not happened at Pinnacles in 120 years. Park officials are keeping the location of the nest confidential so visitors don't disturb the birds.

"She is staying near the nest, doing lot of practice flights," said Rachel Wolstenholme, condor program manager at Pinnacles. "Her parents will help her learn how to fly and where to feed and how to interact with the other wild birds out there."

Of six condor eggs at Pinnacles since 2010, some didn't hatch. Others were eaten by ravens, while another bird did hatch but hurt her wing and was taken to the Los Angeles Zoo.

Lead poisoning remains the main threat to [condors](#), scientists say. Condors eat dead deer, wild pigs, ground squirrels and other animals that

hunters or ranchers may have shot, ingesting lead fragments.

In 2013, over the objection of the National Rifle Association and some hunting groups, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law banning all lead ammunition in hunting in California starting in 2019. Groups such as the Ventana Wilderness Society, a nonprofit organization helping to oversee condor reintroduction in Pinnacles and Big Sur, have handed out nonlead ammunition to ranchers and hunters. That, said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the group, has resulted in a decline in lead poisoning deaths in recent years.

"Shooters who have switched to nonlead ammunition have made an invaluable contribution to the health of all scavenging wildlife," Sorenson said.

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