

**SPECIES OF THE MONTH****CALIFORNIA CONDOR****MARCH 2026**

The California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) is the largest soaring land bird in North America, with a wingspan of 2.8 m, and is one of the most highly endangered birds in the world. Mainly dependent on large mammal carcasses for food, it once ranged widely from Canada to Mexico, across the southern United States to Florida, and to the east coast of New York in prehistoric times, when mammoths (*Mammuthus* spp.), American mastodons (*Mammot americanum*), and other large, now-extinct mammals roamed the continent. With the end of the Pleistocene and the demise of these large mammals, the condor population was nearly wiped out. In 1967, condors were placed on the federal endangered species list, and by the mid-1980s, the estimated wild population was only 22, all in south-central California. All 22 were captured by 1987, and a captive breeding program was launched at zoos in Los Angeles and San Diego.



California Condor with ID tag, Grand Canyon National Park, Coconino County, 30 June 2023. Photo by Chris Benesh

Since then, the total condor population has grown to 566—369 in the wild and 197 in captivity. The current wild population, due both to release and successful fledging in the wild, consists of 232, 89, and 48 birds respectively in California, Arizona-Utah, and Baja California. The Arizona and Utah populations are concentrated on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, Kaibab Plateau on the north side of the Grand Canyon, Vermilion Cliffs National Monument (VCNM), and Marble Canyon in Arizona and Zion National Park in Utah. The primary release location in Arizona is the VCNM. Typically, 6 to 10 captive condors are released every year in Arizona and 10 to 15 in California. The releases involve a gradual introduction into the wild. Captive-raised birds are placed in large pens in remote areas to acclimate to their new surroundings before being permitted to exit on their own. They are outfitted with GPS and VHF transmitters and with identification tags to monitor their movements and health.

One of the challenges to expanding the wild population is that females lay a single egg every other year, and it takes a minimum of 6 years for a juvenile condor to attain sexual maturity. This makes the increase in population sizes dependent on a low mortality rate, but unfortunately birds face a serious threat from the use of lead ammunition by game hunters. Lead poisoning ingested from carcasses causes 49% of mortality in free-flying condors. California has banned the use of lead ammunition, and Arizona and Utah are conducting outreach efforts to convince hunters to voluntarily not use lead bullets. These measures are having some effect, and the wild condor population continues to grow, but very slowly. To be downlisted from endangered to threatened, it will be necessary to maintain at least 2 wild populations and continue a captive population, with at least 150 individuals and 15 breeding pairs in each. They must prove to be self-sustaining. This will require more time to be successful.