

Condors will soon fly over Northern California's iconic redwoods for the first time in more than a century

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The Yurok Tribe and Redwood National Park and State Parks will soon release the first four California condors to take flight in the heart of the bird's former range since 1892.

"For countless generations, the Yurok people have upheld a sacred responsibility to maintain balance in the natural world. Condor reintroduction is a real-life manifestation of our cultural commitment to restore and protect the planet for future generations," said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe.

"On behalf of the Yurok Tribe, I would like to thank all of the individuals, agencies and organizations that helped us prepare to welcome prey-go-neesh (condor) back to our homeland."

"The return of the condors to the skies over the redwoods represents a significant milestone in the restoration of this magnificent forest to its former glory," remarked Redwood National and State Park Superintendent

Steve Mietz. “This project is a model for listening to and following the lead of the park’s original stewards, healing both our relationship with the land and its original people.”

Paul Souza, Regional Director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pacific Southwest Region, said “the reintroduction of condors into Northern California is truly a monumental moment. This effort builds upon the program’s collective knowledge and history of releasing condors and showcases the benefit of partnering with Tribes and others to implement recovery of listed species.”

Souza added, “We are proud to support this collaborative and innovative partnership with the Yurok Tribe and Redwood National Park. Together we can recover listed species for future generations.”

The release of the four birds will be livestreamed at www.facebook.com/TheYurokTribe/ and at <https://www.yuroktribe.org/yurok-condor-live-feed>

Comprised of biologists and technicians from the Yurok Tribe and Redwood National and State Parks, the Northern California Condor Restoration Program will collaboratively manage the flock from a newly constructed condor release and management facility near the Klamath River. The Northern California condor team will work collaboratively with the other condor field teams as part of the larger recovery program guided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The four condors, including one female and three males, are between two and three years old, which is the ideal age range for the birds to flourish in the wild.

Two of the males were hatched at the Peregrine Fund’s World Center for Birds of Prey in Idaho. The other two condors were hatched at the Oregon Zoo and raised at the Idaho center.

In February, the four birds were transferred to the Ventana Wildlife Society’s flight pen in Big Sur before they were transported to the Northern California Restoration Program facility in late March.

Over the last 30 years, the Service’s Condor Recovery Program has developed an exceptionally effective blueprint to guide the reintroduction process, which begins long before the birds are released. For example, reintroduced condors are reared in large flight pens with exposure to the natural environment and, when possible, other condors of various ages for mentorship.

The extremely social avian scavengers acquire life skills from their elders and their own experiences. Elder or mentor birds assist the juvenile condors in obtaining the worldly knowledge they need to survive outside of captivity.

The World Center for Birds of Prey provided the Northern California Restoration Program a seven-year-old condor to fulfill this important function for the four birds as they transition into the wild. Condor 746 will remain in the flight pen and is expected to mentor future release birds at this location.

Similar to the reintroduced condors in Arizona, the Northern California flock will be considered a nonessential, experimental population under the Endangered Species Act. This pragmatic approach was selected because it is proven to be an effective method of recovering federally listed species. Additionally,

the stakeholder-driven strategy better facilitates proactive conservation and reduces the regulatory impact of reintroducing a federally listed species.

At regular intervals, the Northern California Condor Restoration Program will be releasing new condor cohorts into Redwood National and State Parks. Over time, the birds are expected to disperse across Northern California and Southern Oregon.

Through careful management, the Condor Restoration Program's primary goal is to develop a self-sustaining condor population in the rural region, which will fill a currently vacant ecological niche in the redwood forest ecosystem as well as aid in the overall recovery of the species.

Frankie Myers, the Yurok Tribe's Vice Chairman., stated that "every year, the Yurok Tribe completes multiple, large-scale river and forest habitat improvement projects in our ancestral territory. We also manage a 15,000-acre old growth redwood forest and salmon sanctuary."

Condor reintroduction is a major part of the Yurok Tribe's long-term plan to restore the diverse ecosystems within the Yurok homeland," Vice Chairman Myers said. "As a people, we will not recover from the traumas of the last century until we fix our environment. Our culture, our ceremonies, our wellbeing and our identity are inextricably linked to the landscape."

Yurok connection to the condor

The recovery of this sacred species signifies significant progress toward the restoration of an intricately interconnected ecosystem and the people who are responsible for taking care of it.

"Prey-goneesh," the Tribal name for the condor, plays a principal role in the Yurok creation story and is prominently featured in the Tribe's White Deerskin Dance and Jump Dance.

During the ten-day world renewal ceremonies, the condor is represented via the fallen feathers incorporated into tribal regalia and prayers for the earth and all of its inhabitants.

Yurok Wildlife Department Director Tiana Williams-Claussen, a Yurok citizen and traditional culture bearer, has dedicated her entire professional career to condor reintroduction.

"The loss of the condor has limited our capacity to be Yurok because prey-go-neesh is such an important part of our culture and traditions," Williams-Claussen said. "In a very real way, restoring condor habitat and returning condor to Yurok skies is a clear restoration of the Yurok people, homeland, ecological systems, culture, and lifeway."

Williams-Claussen added, "I have a three-year-old-daughter. She is going to grow up with condors in her sky for her entire life. She is not going to know what it is to miss condors. She will always live in relationship with condors, which is really what this project is all about — bringing condor home, back into our communities, back into our conversations, back into our households, and into the minds and hearts of our children on behalf of the hearts of our elders."

The Yurok Tribe started working in earnest on condor reintroduction in 2008, when the Yurok Tribe's Wildlife Department received a tribal wildlife grant from the Service to conduct a study to determine if Yurok ancestral territory could still support North America's largest terrestrial bird.

With support from Redwood National and State Parks, the Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as the Administration for Native Americans, Pacific Gas and Electric and many other contributors, such as the Global Conservation Fund, the Yurok Wildlife Department completed the tremendous amount of work required to reintroduce a critically endangered species.

The following tasks represent a small fraction of what they had to accomplish in order to make condor reintroduction a reality: extensive environmental assessments, contaminant analyses, constant fundraising, planning, designing and constructing facilities, performing intensive community outreach and coordinating with numerous stakeholders and collaborators.

The Plight of the Condor

The decline of the condor started in the 1850s shortly after arrival of European settlers in the American West. During the Gold Rush era, numerous condors were shot for sport and collected for museum displays, while others succumbed to poison used to eradicate large predators, such as grizzly bears and wolves.

One of the first species placed on the federal endangered species list, condor numbers continuously plummeted from 1850 to the 1980s, when a fortuitous decision was made to collect the last 22 birds from the wild and establish the first captive breeding program to save the species.

In 1983, the Service teamed up with the Los Angeles Zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park to launch the first-ever captive breeding facilities. Today, thanks to the Service's Condor Recovery Program's continued success and the efforts of non-profits like the Ventana Wildlife Society, approximately 300 wild condors are flying free in California, the Southwest and Baja California.

There are now four captive breeding centers, which supply birds for the release sites in the U.S. and Mexico, including the Northern California Condor Restoration Program facility.

Designed and built by the Yurok Tribe on park land, the condor release and management facility boasts a blend of the most functional elements from all of the rearing and release sites in the United States.

The flight pen has a simulated power pole, designed to train condors to avoid power lines and utility poles, two three-foot diameter pools and a perch overlooking the redwood forest.

Senior Biologist and Yurok Condor Restoration Program Manager Chris West leads the condor release and management facility. He has worked with condors for decades before coming to the Tribe in 2008.

The wildlife team custom-welded two shipping containers to form a fire-resistant observation station and isolation pens, where birds will receive regular health assessments and treatment if needed.

“We are fortunate to be able to develop our program based on an immense quantity of traditional ecological knowledge and 30 years of real-world condor recovery experience. We are truly standing on the shoulders of the giants,” West said. “For these reasons, I have no doubt that our reintroduction will serve as a gateway to bring the condor back to the Pacific Northwest.”

A high-definition livestream feed from the site, is available at <https://www.yuroktribe.org/yurok-condor-live-feed>.