

Lord Of The Wings

by Despina Rosales

You'll never believe what a morning it's been! I've just had the ride of my life. I wasn't in a car, I wasn't on an aeroplane. I wasn't on a motorbike or on a pair of rollerblades. I was on a *condor*.

A condor is a bird. But it's not *just* a bird; the condor is the lord of *all* birds. Of all the animals in the world that can fly, condors are the BIGGEST. Which means the condor is the lord of the wings!

Part 1: The Fellowship Of The Condor

While I was cruising through the skies on the condor, I found out some interesting things. Condors start breeding late - around five to seven years of age. They normally breed once every two years laying only one egg. This makes their population growth pretty slow.

When condors pick someone to be with, they stay with that mate for life. To pick a life partner, condors (like many birds) perform a courtship dance. They walk back and forth with their wings out, making hissing and clucking sounds. Their bald heads turn a deep pink-red, and their throat sacks puff out.

If this 30-second dance is a success, the pair then break from the flock (signalling that they're now partners) and glide with flexed wings to their mating area, the female in the lead. Then they mate and if the mating is successful, an egg will soon be laid.

Strange Nesters

I wanted to see what kind of place a condor would live in, so my condor friend took me for a quick visit. As far as location goes, anything from sea level to an elevation of up to 5,500 metres will do. When it comes to home decor, these birds are minimalists! They find a hole in a rock and live in it. No furniture, no posters on the wall, nothing. Just a hole in a rock - or a rock crevice or ledge.

And when it comes to nesting, they're no different. The solitary egg is laid from a standing position on the bare ground of a ledge, or in a cave on a cliff, or in crevices among boulders. The egg is exposed to wind and bad weather, and banked with rocks or debris.

Shared Parenting

The male and female take turns incubating the egg for two to five days at a time. The chick then hatches after 54-58 days.

At first a chick would be *brooded* (kept warm by the parent) continuously. But as soon as the second *down* (or set of feathers) appears, the brooding is reduced to night time only. The baby condor stays close to the eggshell for the first three weeks, and begins to wander outside the nest at about eight weeks old. At around five months the chick begins practice flights of just a few metres.

Most likely you'll be at home with your parents looking after you for around 18 years - or more! - but if you were a condor, you'd be looked after for only two years before it would be time to move out of home. So when the second springtime of a condor's life rolls around, it's time for it to leave its parents.

Unlike humans, who sometimes have a few babies in a row, condors don't have a new chick while they have another in their care. Only once the chick has flown the nest, does the mating cycle begin again.

Part 2: The Two Condors

There are only two kinds of condor: the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) and the Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*).

Besides the one major difference of living on different continents (the first one lives in North America, and the second one lives in South America), the two condors have most characteristics in common.

Fight, Height, Weight And Flight

Condors are not the aggro type, so rather than having actual fights, they make ritual displays. In other words, they pose and dance about. Instead of having an argument, they just do a little jig to sort out the problem.

The condor taking me for a ride was just under one-and-a-half metres in length from head to tail (I had a tape measure with me so I know for sure). That's apparently as big as condors get. In fact, we had a quick weigh-in on my bathroom scales before we took off from my place, and this fellow weighed no less than 15 kilos. That's quadruple the weight of my cat. And I know one other thing: if *any* cat and this bird squared off, the one running away would have four legs, not two!

You'll be surprised to know that this creature, which covers 50 kilometres a day - sometimes much more - in the air, is too heavy to cover these distances by flying. So how do they spend all that time in the air? Well, condors *soar* instead. Soaring is a bird's way of riding air currents to stay airborne rather than the bird powering itself by flying (flapping its wings). The condor can fly - it flaps its wings just long enough to get off the ground.

The bird's three-metre wing span (and the huge surface area of these wings) allows the condor to soar on thermals (warm air currents) with little effort, for very long distances - and at great speeds. In fact, I had to wear my jumper and a scarf some of the time because this condor reached speeds of 88 kilometres per hour, and altitudes of 4,500 metres! It's cold at that height, especially at that speed, and there were definitely moments when I wished I'd brought my beanie along.

Soaring's not easy - it takes condors up to a year to master it, but when they're good, boy are they good! Sometimes my condor friend went as far as 16 kilometres without a single flap of his wings.

Dinner, Anyone?

The whole point of soaring for so many hours every day is to find food. After ages soaring about the place, my condor friend finally found a bite to eat. I was starving, so I was stoked that we were finally going to have a break for lunch.

But I forgot that condors aren't hunters - they're scavengers. This means they eat rotting food. Needless to say I wasn't too hungry any more, so I had a little drink from the stream close by.

I was pretty grossed-out by the whole thing at the time, but looking back, I can see that condors (like all other scavengers) are part of nature's clean-up crew, and are a vital part of the ecosystem. Without scavengers like them, things would get pretty messy.

Chats And Hats

Condors are not talkative types because they lack a *syrix*, the organ that produces a bird's voice. They do make some sounds (hisses, wheezes, coughs and grunts) but are mainly silent, relying more on body language to communicate.

And I can tell you, finding out all this information about condors wasn't easy - *you* try getting information out of a bird that doesn't talk! Of course, I'm now an expert in body language and the art of mime.

I've just remembered another difference between the two types of condor: while it's impossible to tell male and female California condors apart just by looking at them, male and female Andean condors look different to each other. The females are a bit smaller and have red eyes (sort of like my mum when she gets angry), while males have brown eyes and a *caruncle* or *comb* (a large, fleshy growth) on their head.

Since they have few natural enemies other than humans, condors tend to be curious and bold. And on top of that, they are bald. Yes, condor heads are totally naked, with no feathers to speak of. They're not the best-looking birds. But a condor's baldness helps it stay clean.

You see, condors tend to poke their head and neck into animal carcasses to *disembowel* them (that means to rip their guts out), and being feather-free from the shoulders up means blood and meat flows off the bird's neck and head. What doesn't slide away is easily cleaned off by rubbing on grass, rocks or branches. In fact, condors are very clean creatures and will bathe and preen their feathers hours after eating.

Body feathers help keep the condor insulated, but how does a bald-headed bird like this keep its noggin warm when it's chilly? Well, special muscles in the skin allow it to pull the ruff (or neck feathers) up over the back of its head - kind of like a built-in scarf.

Part 3: The Return Of The Condor

When I got home from my condor ride, the first thing I did was raid the fridge for about an hour. Then I went online to read about condors on the Internet. I was pretty sad to find out that condors are in danger of becoming extinct.

Accidental poisoning, loss of habitat, air pollution, and water contamination are not helping the condor's quest for survival. And then there are humans who shoot animals, including condors, for 'sport'.

A Question Of Conservation

With all this business going on there aren't many condors left at all. There are few Andean condors, but there are enough to keep the population going. The California condor is much worse off and in need of help to survive. Conservation breeding programs started many years ago to help save the California condor. During egg-laying season (mid-January to mid-April) the keepers manage to get these one-egg-laying birds to lay two, by using a tricky little technique called *double clutching*.

This means that they secretly remove the first egg, and - just as would happen in the wild if an egg were lost - the female lays a replacement. It doesn't harm the condor, or the egg, and it means more condors are born.

What happens then is that the removed egg is put in an incubator until a chick is born. A newly hatched chick weighs 150-200 grams and lives in an infant isolation unit for the first 30 days of its life.

Imprinting is when new born babies attach themselves to the species they first see when they're born, even if it's not their own species. It's important that once condors are released into the wild they'll want to hang out with other condors, so, by using condor-shaped glove puppets keepers make sure a human-reared condor chick doesn't become imprinted (or attached) to humans. These human-reared condor chicks don't actually see or smell a human being until they are five months old.

Humans: The Biggest Threat

Animals, such as condors, who are at the top of a food chain are never the prey - that is, until humans get involved, and become the top animal's only threat. Whether it's on purpose, incidental or accidental - humans are the single biggest danger to the condor.

There's some good news, though: you'll be happy to hear that the first successful breeding of captive California condors happened in 1988. The other good news is that in 2004 there were 246 California condors, with over 110 of these in the wild and flying free. So things have improved. It's possible that we'll see the return of this king of the skies, and the lord of the wings will be saved after all!