

Get the Lead Out

by Joseph Youren, ASLC Vice President



Condor reintroduction was once again discussed at our most recent Oregon Audubon Council fall meeting. The fall meeting is reserved for discussing conservation issues and establishing action priorities for our individual chapters and the Council as a whole.

California Condors WILL, in the very near future, appear over the Oregon coast as the US Fish and Wildlife and the Yuroc Tribe work with the Oregon Zoo to rear and prepare individuals for release into the wild. These magnificent birds have a historic range from British Columbia to Mexico. It stretches from the Pacific Coast to the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and

New Mexico. At the time of Lewis and Clark, they soared over the Columbia River Gorge and congregated in good numbers on whale carcasses. Western expansion and resulting loss of habitat, deliberate poisonings, and hunting, decimated their population and by 1980 condors were gone from the wild and very nearly extinct. A captive breeding program has since revived the species and reintroduction programs began in 1991. Unfortunately, these early reintroduction programs failed as every single individual died from lead they had ingested by feeding on game animals killed with lead ammunition. Even today, condors released into the wild must be recaptured and treated for lead in their blood.

The greatest danger to these birds today is still ingested lead. As carrion feeders, they typically eat 4 to 5 pounds of meat at a time and then do not feed for days after. Their primary source of food are the carcasses of large animals and most often these are the remains of deer and elk taken by hunters using lead ammunition. When hunters harvest deer or elk they typically discard the internal organs and skeletal remains in the woods. These remains are then eaten by birds of prey and mammals like wolves, wolverines, and fishers. Unfortunately, so is the lead. Studies show that the meat from animals killed with lead ammunition is contaminated by thousands upon thousands of tiny lead fragments. While these particles are too small to detect with the human eye, they stand out under X-rays. No level of lead is safe. Lead ingested by humans damages the central nervous system. The danger is particularly great for children. This short video explains the risks of lead in fish and game:

<https://nutritionfacts.org/video/lead-contamination-in-fish-and-game/>

The Oregon public has been made aware of the dangers of lead in drinking water and is demanding action but the problem does not stop there. Lead does not have to be used in ammunition or in fishing tackle. Alternatives are readily available. We need to ban the use of lead in these products as we did with paint and gasoline – for exactly the same reason: no amount of lead exposure is acceptable. The California Condor is the canary-in-a-coal mine (with a ten-foot wingspan).

A great resource for learning more about condors and challenges we face in bringing them back is the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Southwest Region which covers California, Nevada, and the Klamath Basin. <https://www.fws.gov/cno/es/calcondor/CondorResources.cfm>

Please study the issues, get involved, and help us bring these birds back to the skies over Oregon.