

Stepping into the wind with California condors

“OH MY GOD,” the gray-haired woman standing at my side exclaimed. That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen!” This from someone who moments before blurted, “Those are the ugliest birds I’ve ever seen.” Like this woman, readers of Sophie A. H. Osborn’s 2007 book, *Condors in canyon country: The return of the California condor to the Grand Canyon region*, are suddenly captivated by condor flight. The book chronicles the historical decline of the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) and the efforts to save it. It focuses on the Grand Canyon of Arizona but follows events in California because the Arizona birds “owe their history and their fates to [these condors] and to those who struggled to keep the California birds from extinction” (Osborn, p. 3).

Words like “stunning” describe the photo of an adult condor peering through its flight feathers, “amazing” for the picture of a hatchling condor emerging from its egg, and “majestic” for the condor portrait on the book’s final page. Readers could be satisfied simply perusing the book’s photos and captions but are enticed by chapter topics such as natural history, condors in the past, captivity and reintroductions, condor behavior, survival of condors, and wild condors.

With so few condors remaining and so carefully watched, these birds become individuals with distinctive personalities. Condors are playful, curious, and intelligent. According to Osborn, “the need for scavengers to evaluate their situation and make a variety of adaptive decisions that will allow them to feed safely, compete with other scavengers, and avoid predators every time they encounter a new carcass likely explains why much of scavenger

behavior appears to be learned rather than innate” (Osborn, p. 64).

But learning by doing can be problematic for many juvenile condors who are not equipped to survive in the wild without guidance. Every story in the book may have a silver lining, but every silver lining seems to have a cloud: Readers are amused by the descriptions of condor play, which ultimately contributes to motor and sensory development, but frustrated by their selection of toys (i.e., trash), which they ingest and ultimately regurgitate to their young. Their natural curiosity and intelligence makes them extremely interesting but can equate to life-threatening “bad behavior,” often making hazing an integral part of wildlife management. The condors’ attraction to activity, commotion, and crowds, which perhaps resemble herds or congregating animals where births and deaths (i.e., available food) occur, makes Grand Canyon’s South Rim the most reliable place on Earth to see California condor in the wild, but also puts the birds in proximity to potentially dangerous situations that may defeat their safe return to the wild.

As the book jacket states, *Condors in canyon country* is “a must-read for anyone passionate about endangered species and what humankind can do to save them.” The book takes a subtly scientific approach and addresses many scientific inquiries: Did condors have a continuous presence in the Grand Canyon between the Pleistocene Epoch and historic times? What are the causes of decline? How do scientists maximize the genetic diversity remaining in an extremely small population for successful breeding? What is the significance of double- and triple-clutching? What technologies are the most appropriate for tracking condors? What factors inhibit the survival of condors in the wild? So caught up in hoping for the survival of “a creature so utterly captivating, so highly treasured, so nearly lost” (Osborn, p. 2), readers may not realize that their scientific questions are being answered.

Reference

Osborn, S. A. H. 2007. *Condors in canyon country: The return of the California condor to the Grand Canyon region*. Grand Canyon Association, Grand Canyon, Arizona.