

Colorado Plateau Condor Update
Submission by Elaine F. Leslie
Wildlife Biologist
elaine_leslie@nps.gov
(928) 638-7904

Biologist's hopes ran high in 2002 for breeding California condors in Grand Canyon National Park (GRCA). In March, following months of observations of courtship displays, nest investigations and preparations, GRCA Biologists confirmed that two pairs of condors were nesting just off the South Rim—clearly visible to biologists and the very interested visiting public. A volunteer Nestwatch Program was organized including over twenty volunteers from across the state. They recorded incubation shifts and foraging behavior of the four adult birds from sunrise to sunset. As incubation for condors is approximately 60 days, the staff had an opportunity for the first time to collect behavioral data on condors nesting in the Arizona wilds.

Volunteers kept detailed records on each incubation shift for both the males and females. As the nests were facing each other on opposite cliffs, nestwatching became an interpretive event that allowed visitors to have contact with biologists and view nest caves with provided scopes and binoculars. As mid-May approached, just days from hatching, condor incubation shifts abruptly ceased for both pairs, indicating nest failures.

Dangling from a 200-foot rope with a 400-foot sheer drop below, rangers entered one of the caves. There, they retrieved eggshell fragments and both Pleistocene era and historic bone fragments. This suggests that condors have utilized this particular cave for three periods in history. Although challenges still face the program, such as intentional shootings and lead contaminant issues, hope remains high for the 2003 breeding season as four pairs mature to breeding age.