DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Observers Report Decline in Number of Nesting Condor Pairs

Recent observations of the critically endangered California condor indicate an apparent reduction in the number of breeding pairs from five last year to only two this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game reported today.

Although nesting activity should have begun in the past two months, researchers at the Condor Research Center in Ventura, California, have observed only single adult condors in the territories of three of the pairs that nested in 1984.

In addition, at a fourth breeding territory, one of the pair is missing, but its mate has apparently formed a new pair bond with a different bird. This pair is expected to produce an egg soon.

Biologists are concerned that the missing birds may have died. If so, the wild population of condors may now consist of a minimum of 11 birds. Through October 1984, biologists estimated a minimum of 15 condors in the wild population, including the five known breeding pairs, two subadults not yet old enough to breed, and three unpaired adults. Final count of the 1985 population will be made in September when distinctive feather patterns are apparent, allowing biologists to identify individual birds.

Nine condors have been outfitted with radio transmitters since 1982 to enable biologists to track their movements, but only one of the condors now missing had a radio transmitter. Researchers are receiving no signals from its transmitter and so are unable to trace the bird. A second radioed bird died last year; biologists were able to locate it from the radio signals and later determined that it had died of lead poisoning after consuming a bullet fragment that was probably contained in the carcass of an animal the condor ate. This leaves seven radioed condors in the wild.

One of the remaining breeding pairs has already laid two eggs this year. The first egg, laid in mid-February, was taken by biologists to the San Diego Wild Animal Park, where it is expected to hatch in April. Removal of an egg is known to stimulate production of a second egg — a technique known as "double clutching" — and this pair has just produced its second egg, which was also taken to the San Diego facility on March 19.

The apparent loss of three of the breeding pairs follows a highly successful breeding season during 1984. Last year the five condor pairs — encouraged by researchers to increase their normal rate of reproduction through "double-clutching" — produced a total of nine eggs. Eight of these were removed from the wild and hatched in captivity at the San Diego Zoo; they produced six healthy, surviving offspring. The ninth egg hatched in the wild and the chick was later captured and taken to the Los Angeles Zoo. Altogether, there are now 16 condors in captivity at the Los Angeles and San Diego Zoos, including the eggs and nestlings taken during 1983 and 1984 and an adult male that has been in captivity since 1967.

The taking of the eggs and nestlings into captivity is part of the long-term recovery plan for the condor, which calls for establishment of a captive breeding flock whose offspring would eventually be released to supplement the number of wild condors. The restoration of a viable wild population is the ultimate goal of the recovery program. However, only one of the 16 condors now in captivity is old enough to breed. It will probably be at least another five years before offspring from these captive birds would be available for release.

For the captive breeding program to succeed, however, the birds that will be bred cannot be too closely related. Thus, researchers planned to continue taking eggs and nestlings produced in the wild into captivity until they had a sufficient number of birds of both sexes and different parentage to give a good assurance of success. At the same time, they planned to release young condors now in captivity that would not be needed for the breeding program. Under current plans, three young condors would be released later this year, pending success of this year's efforts to obtain an adequate number of wild-laid eggs for hatching in captivity.

The California Condor Recovery Team — composed of Federal, State, and private biologists — is presently reviewing the current status of the wild condors, and will soon recommend to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service whether the planned recovery activities need to be modified because of the decline in the number of wild breeding condors. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will consult with the State of California concerning any proposed decisions that might arise based on the recovery team's recommendations. Both the concurrence of the California Fish and Game Commission and a Federal permit under the Endangered Species Act would be required for any significant changes in the recovery program.

Interior Least Tern, Three Gulf Coast Beach Mice Added to Endangered Species List

The interior population of the least tern, a Midwestern bird whose historic abundance impressed explorers Lewis and Clark on their westward explorations, and three subspecies of beach mice found along the windswept barrier island sand dunes of the Gulf Coast have been added to the U.S. list of endangered and threatened species.

The actions, announced recently by

the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, expanded the list of imperiled species to 854, of which 356 species are found in this country and 498 are found only in foreign countries. One of these newly-added species — the small, secretive Perdido Key beach mouse — is considered the nation's most critically endangered small mammal, with an estimated population of only 26 individual mice.

The interior least tern joins its relative, the California least tern, as a species receiving the protections of the Federal Endangered Species Act. (A third variety of least tern, the eastern or coastal least tern, found along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of the United States, is not an endangered species.)

This tern, a small bird with the black crown, forked tail, and graceful, buoyant flight pattern characteristic of the species, was once a common resident of the great river systems of the central United States. The bird historically bred along portions of the Colorado (Texas/Oklahoma), Red, Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers.

Lewis and Clark frequently observed the least tern along the length of the Missouri River and near the mouth of the Platte River. Historical data for the bird are poor, however, and estimates of original numbers are generally not available, although records indicate that it once bred over a much larger area and in a far greater number of colonies than it does today.

An estimated 1,400 to 1,800 interior least terns are believed to exist within the bird's historic breeding range, which includes Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Tennessee and inland portions of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. In many of these states, however, the least tern is virtually absent; in Louisiana, for instance, where it was a common breeding bird, it is now absent, as it is in Mississippi, and only 30 terns have been counted in Arkansas and Illinois, respectively.

The least tern's decline has been attributed to the flooding and destruction of its nesting islands by channelization projects and reservoir construction along the Mississippi River and many of its tributaries. On many of the remaining nesting islands, alteration of river flows has caused unfavorable growth of trees and other vegetation, curtailing use of these sites by nesting terns. ●

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