

BOOK REVIEWS

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The California Condor: A Saga of Natural History and Conservation.—Noel Snyder and Helen Snyder. 2000. Academic Press, London and San Diego. xxi + 410 pp., 23 tables and 133 text figures, including 98 color photographs. ISBN 0-12-654005-5. \$29.95 (cloth).

In the Prologue to *The California Condor*, authors Noel and Helen Snyder state that their objective for writing the book was “to give the reader an appreciation of both the basic biology of the condor and the dynamics of condor conservation from a viewpoint mainly inside the conservation and research program.” They go on to decry the distortions and biases of those who have previously tried to tell the story, characterizing *The California Condor* as the first accurate, objective, and non-embellished account of the species and the efforts to save it.

The California Condor first became the subject of public controversy in the early 1950s, when the San Diego Zoo sought to capture some for a breeding program. Opponents of the capture were able to slow the process, and in 1959 the State of California declared the species “fully protected,” a designation that prohibited capturing condors for any purpose. This ban stayed in effect for twenty years before biologists were able to present a convincing case for capturing condors for radio-telemetry studies and captive propagation. From 1969 to 1979 I was the principal researcher on the species and leader of the Condor Recovery Team. It was my task to develop the plans that, when approved, would permit hands-on research on the species. By 1979 all involved government agencies and many nongovernment organizations had endorsed the plans, but the atmosphere was still emotionally charged. It was at this point that the senior author of *The California Condor* succeeded me as principal researcher on the species, suddenly finding himself in a highly charged sociopolitical milieu. His attempts to balance biology and politics in the early 1980s provide the underlying drama for this book.

Artistically and editorially, *The California Condor* is well presented. Almost of coffee-table-book size, it is printed on glossy paper and has a profusion of both color and black-and-white photographs of the birds, their habitat, and the research program. In a fairly diligent search, I found only one typographical error (p. 84, Mike Silbernagle’s name misspelled) and one geographical inaccuracy (p. 74, Granite Station misplaced into Tulare, rather than Kern, County). It would have been helpful to have the various text figures and line drawings numbered, as was done with the tables, but this is only a minor inconvenience.

The material in *The California Condor* is divided into six sections, covering knowledge of the condor up

to 1980 (Part I), the research program of the early 1980s, in which the senior author was involved (Parts II and III), some of the politics of the 1980s (Part IV), captive breeding and release (Part V), and a concluding philosophical overview (Part VI). The depth of coverage varies considerably from section to section, depending on whether the authors are summarizing other people’s work or presenting their own. Writing style is also highly variable, ranging from appropriately spare prose when reporting research findings, to flamboyant folksiness when taking aim at their detractors.

Part I, “Historical and Background Matters,” includes three review chapters, setting the stage for more detailed accounts of condor research and management after 1979. Chapter 1, “Some Perspectives on Basic Condor Biology,” includes a concise, up-to-date treatment of archeological relationships and current taxonomy; a brief but adequate introduction to condor habitat needs, including some discussion of divergent opinions on the subject; and a short overview of condor biology and lifestyle. One point made by the authors, which is generally overlooked but likely very important to condor reintroduction programs, is that the pre-1800 California Condor apparently inhabited much more diverse habitats and climates than we usually attribute to the species. Comparing them to other members of the New World vulture group, this should not be surprising, but since the beginning of the twentieth century condors and the sandstone cliffs and caves of southern California have seemed inseparable.

Chapter 2, “California Condors in Prehistoric, Historic, and Modern Human Cultures,” begins with a nice synthesis of literature on the condor’s place in Native American myth and ceremony. The authors soon get out of their depth, however, and make very weak cases for the effects of various practices on early condor populations. For example (p. 43–44), they reject the conclusion of anthropologist Dwight D. Simons that ceremonial use of condors by California tribes likely had little or no effect on condor population size and stability, in favor of Ian McMillan (a rancher with neither biological nor anthropological credentials) and “his general view that the ceremonial practices may have had major impacts.” From only a few descriptions of ceremonial use of condors (these mainly anecdotal, and at least one clearly not even of a condor), they estimate a “potential annual taking” of 700 condors sacrificed by Native American tribes in central and southern California. They admit that this is “no doubt an unrealistically high estimate,” but note that the figure “would remain impressively high even

if divided by 10.” True, but there is no more evidence for the figure of 70 than there is for 700.

The authors’ discussion (p. 45–47) of the use of condor quills to store gold dust follows a similarly unsatisfying path, citing four accounts between 1840 and 1940 that “suggest that many condors may have been shot for their quills in the 19th and early 20th centuries.” Actually, only two of the accounts were first hand, and only one apparently involved condors that were shot specifically for their quills. If one considers that the most active gold mining areas were well outside of the principal California Condor range, and that the gold-finding rate of the average miner didn’t require him to have a large (or even a small) supply of feathers, the Snyders’ conclusion is puzzling. Even odder is their final statement on the subject, that shooting for quills “may have been much more important than museum collecting in the past woes of the species.” I documented 177 condors taken as museum specimens, 111 of those in a 29-year period (North American Fauna 72:18–22, 1978). Granted that most museum mortality was likely reported, and most shooting for quills or sport was not, the comparison of 111 known collected in 29 years versus three known shot for quills in approximately 90 years should raise some questions about the authors’ conclusion.

Chapter 3, “Condor Research and Conservation in the Early–Mid-20th Century,” attempts to review the principal California Condor study efforts prior to 1980. These include the work of William L. Finley (principally a wildlife photographer, but he left excellent records of the condors he was involved with), Cyril Robinson and Bob Easton, Sr. (the first to advocate active preservation of condor habitat), Carl Koford (the first in-depth study of the species), the McMillan brothers (a superficial look at condors in the early 1960s), Fred C. Sibley (the first since Koford to actively study condors), and my own research from 1969 to 1979. The Snyders’ treatment of the subject through the Koford period is objective and well balanced. However, they give much greater weight and significance to the McMillans than their observations deserve, considering that the rancher brothers had no credentials for the job given them by National Audubon Society. In general, the Sibley and Wilbur research efforts are covered accurately and fairly. However, the Snyders strongly disagree with some of my findings, apparently because they have misinterpreted them. For example, they opine (p. 81) that the lack during the 1980s of “detailed studies of nesting condors” (meaning that few nest caves were entered) might have been because of “reticence by administrators and researchers alike to deal with renewed vitriol of Ian McMillan,” who had loudly and repeatedly criticized Sibley for his condor nest entries. Indeed, McMillan continued to be a scathing critic—I have a file perhaps an inch thick containing only post-1969 McMillan criticisms, covering virtually every aspect of Fish and Wildlife Service research!—but that was not the reason I refrained from disturbing nest caves. Actually, my research supervisor, Dr. Ray C. Erickson, and I saw no reason to repeat Sibley’s comprehensive nest checks, and opted to emphasize other aspects of condor research. Even in hindsight, it proved a good decision.

Part II, “Struggles to Launch a New Program,” is covered in three chapters. Chapter 5 (Africa and Peru) and Chapter 6 (Development and Testing of Research Techniques) are interesting reading, and cover aspects of the condor research program that until now have not been addressed as much as some other topics. Chapter 4 (Battles in the Political Arena) is a decided change of pace from most of the rest of the book, dealing with the senior author’s frustrations with what he labels the “sociopolitical” aspects of condor recovery. It turned out to be a major mistake (at least in the short term) for the Federal government to appoint to the recovery team at that critical time researchers who had (in the authors’ own words, p. xx [prologue]) “minimal relevant experience to help us deal with the political aspects of condor affairs.” In a very short time, they found themselves at odds with some of the cooperating agencies and organizations, killed a nestling condor, set a brush fire while practicing with a cannon-net, and provoked a lawsuit against the condor recovery plan. Most condor research and all significant condor management came to a halt for several critical years.

The authors do a disservice to their readers by alleging that the condor controversy of the early 1980s was a simple case of Friends of the Earth “using” the condors to promote establishment of a major national wilderness in the southern California mountains. Actually, there were many concerns voiced by both scientists and nonscientists, including differences of opinion on the scope, timing, urgency, and practicality of capturing condors for radio-telemetry and captive breeding; costs of the program; the fate of any forest and rangeland that would be left unoccupied if condors were removed to zoos; and the credentials of the new researchers.

Part III, “Research Results of the New Program,” includes Chapters 7 through 12 dealing with, respectively: censusing, condor movements and food, nest sites, breeding behavior, breeding success, and mortality. I found much to disagree with in these chapters, but mostly it comes down to one researcher thinking his speculations are better than those of someone else. The authors present a lot of information and opinion, and the careful reader will find much to think about. The topic most extensively covered in Part III is lead poisoning. The authors document several post-1980 incidents of condor deaths in which lead poisoning was the apparent cause, and conclude (p. 250) that it was “potentially the most important mortality problem faced by the species.” The source of the lead was believed to be (p. 252) “ingested lead from carrion foods that have been shot and still contained lead ammunition or shot pellets.” The authors may be correct, but their data and conclusions are not convincing. Shooting of deer, ground squirrels, and mammalian predators has declined markedly since the 1960s, as a result of the curbing of predator and rodent control programs and a 70% decline in deer hunting in areas occupied by condors. In contrast to the authors’ contention (p. 261) that condors in the 1980s “fed heavily on the remains of deer,” it appears much more likely that deer remains have been only an occasional food source since at least the 1960s. While lead poisoning obvi-

ously occurred, it was either less of a problem than the authors conclude, or the source was something other than hunting.

The last six chapters of *The California Condor* deal principally with the captive breeding program and subsequent release efforts. They make interesting reading, and include many of the authors' recommendations for improvements over current techniques. In Chapter 15, "The Audubon Lawsuit and the Valentine's Day Docufesto," the authors attempt to give a lesson in endangered species politics. It is ironic to read (p. 310–311) that, in the authors' opinion, controversies erupted because of "a basic betrayal of recovery team function" by East Coast bureaucrats in both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Audubon Society. Ironic, because in the late 1970s the senior author was strongly on the side of those same East Coast administrators when he and they disregarded the recommendations and approved plans of the then-active recovery team. As the authors describe in Chapter 4, the results in the two instances were much the same.

The California Condor was written more for a general readership than for the authors' scientist peers, and the authors often use language that conveys ideas without really substantiating them. Some of the loose writing is merely the idiom of popular journalism. For example, they write (p. xvi) that the condor is a "species with a life-span potentially rivaling the human species," although only one California Condor is known to have lived longer than 40 years, and only a few are known to have topped 30 years. More serious in my estimation is their use of important-sounding but essentially meaningless words to support assertions for which they have only weak evidence. Here are just a few of the phrases they use to stress the apparent seriousness of the lead poisoning threat: (p. 75) "... if these condors were poisoned (which does not seem unlikely);" (p. 76) lead poisoning in the 1980s was "very possibly" caused by hunting; (p. 93) some deer carcasses "were presumably contaminated" with lead; (p. 152) they are "reasonably confident that a substantial proportion of the species' diet in the fall was hunter-shot deer;" and (p. 164) a lead rifle slug found in a nest cave "could conceivably have been responsible for the poisoning of generations of condor nestlings." *The California Condor* is not the accurate and objective book that the Snyders promised in their introduction. It is an interesting book, and it is important for being the first condor book written in some time by someone who actually has first-hand knowledge of the species. Hopefully, it will not be the last to be written about this major wildlife recovery effort.—SANFORD R. WILBUR, Symbios, 4367 S.E. 16th, Gresham, OR 97080, E-mail: symbios@ix.netcom.com