What's Happening
IN CALIFORNIA ?
BY LAWRENCE GABLE
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PG&E Helps Big Sur's Condors

California condors are the largest flying land bird in North America. In the past fifty years they have struggled to survive. One danger to them is electrical power lines. Now California's largest utility company, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), is removing some power lines to protect condors.

Condors used to live across much of North America. By about 500 years ago, though, their range had shrunk to the Pacific coast. By the early 1900s they flew mostly just in central California.

Condors have faced a number of dangers. One major problem was lead poisoning. The birds got it when they fed on carcasses that hunters had shot with lead bullets. Many birds also died when people shot them. Others died when they made contact with electric power lines. Pesticides from farms poisoned them, and human population growth also took away much of the condor's natural habitat.

In 1967 the U.S. government started identifying endangered species. The condor was on that first list. By 1982 there were only 22 condors left. Then a condor recovery program captured birds and helped them breed. In 1987 it captured the last wild condor. Five years later the program began releasing some back into the wild.

The condor's recovery has gone well. Birds have been hatching not only in captivity, but also in the wild. Now there are 369 California condors. Just less than half of them are still in captivity. Nearly 200 are living in the wild in Arizona, Utah and California. More than 50 condors are flying in central California.

The Ventana Wildlife Society in Monterey County has a condor program. It captures the birds, tags them, and gives them medical care. In 1997 it began releasing condors into the wild along the Big Sur coast. It has noticed that one particular stretch of power lines has caused three deaths in recent years. The birds either collided with the lines or got electrocuted.

PG&E is also interested in protecting the condor, so it has volunteered to remove those lines. The lines have been there since the 1950s. They stretch about three miles across a high, remote area. The company will dig trenches and put new lines underground. Then it will remove 46 wooden utility poles.

PG&E's work starts at the beginning of September. The project will end in December. The company believes that the project has several benefits. It will provide better service to its customers. It also will become a model for other utility companies. Best of all, it will remove a danger to the majestic California condor.

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BIOGRAPHY

MIKE BEST

MANAGER, AVIAN PROTECTION PROGRAM, PG&E

Mike Best grew up in Lodi right near a river. He and a friend went fishing every day. That interest in nature continues to this day, even in his work. He works for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. As manager of its Avian Protection Program he protects birds from danger.

In school Mike did well in science courses. In college he majored in Environmental Studies. His classes covered a wide range of topics like biology and environmental law. That prepared him for a career working with nature.

"We are the only utility company in the U.S. to protect endangered species like this."

His first job after college was in vegetation management. Mr. Best inspected trees that were growing too close to power lines. He identified trees there that needed trimming. At that time he also became an arborist. For two years he used that knowledge of trees in the Central Valley and in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

In 2000 he began working for PG&E. His first job was to make sure that crews were trimming trees properly near power lines. Then he was a forester in the northern Sacramento Valley. Whenever PG&E customers had complaints about tree trimming, he handled the problem. He also worked closely with cities and towns on their trees near power poles and lines.

Then in 2004 Mr. Best became manager of the company's Avian Protection Program. PG&E serves customers in most of the state south to Santa Barbara County. It has the program because many kinds of birds have problems with utility lines and poles. This is especially true for large birds like bald eagles, owls, hawks and condors.

Mike Best spends about 40 percent of his time out of his office. He makes sure that PG&E is following local, state and federal laws that protect birds. Often he meets with people from the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. PG&E has more than 150,000 miles of power lines. He certainly wants birds to be safe. He also does not want them to cause problems and interrupt service to customers.

Mr. Best goes to Big Sur often. He drives on dirt roads to remote areas. He goes on foot in those areas too, and every time he sees condors in flight. His program has installed rings on lines so that condors will see and avoid the lines. It also has switched to insulated wires that will prevent electrocution. Now his program also is protecting condors by burying lines.

Even though it is not every day, Mike Best still goes fishing whenever he can. What he does do every day, though, is just as important. He is using his knowledge and skills to allow PG&E and the birds of California to share the same spaces safely.

Background Information

PG&E's work to put lines underground is called the Big Sur Condor Retrofit Project. The lines run from Highway 1 to Anderson Peak, which is 4,000 feet high. The project will cost $4.2 million.

The Ventana Wildlife Society found that condors tend to fly parallel to the power lines that run north-south from Carmel down into Big Sur. The lines that PG&E is putting underground are the only ones that run east-west, so they were crossing condors' flight path.

Adult condors stand about four feet high, weigh about 25 pounds, and have a wingspan of 9 1/2 feet. Their size causes a problem when they perch on power lines. Sitting on one line is fine, but if a bird accidentally touches two lines at ones, it gets electrocuted.

The Ventana Wildlife Society provides carcasses for condors to feed on. It also monitors nests to support breeding.

Condors are scavengers that feed only on carcasses. However, for a long time some ranchers and people who lived on farms shot condors because they thought that condors killed their animals.

Condors fly as far as 150 miles per day while looking for food. They soar with currents of warm air that take the birds as high as 15,000 feet. Because they glide so well, they can fly over a hundred miles in a single flight.

Condors live to be 50–60 years old. At age six or seven they find a mate for life. Condors breed once every other year. Chicks make their first flight at about six months of age.

PG&E set up a utility pole at the Ventana Wildlife Society's center so that biologists could train the condors in captivity to avoid poles in the wild. The company also installs platforms on some poles so that large birds like ospreys have a safe place to nest.

In 2007 Gov. Schwarzenegger signed a law that banned lead ammunition from areas where the condor lives. Lead poisoning has killed about thirty condors in the last ten years.

When California designed its 2005 Commemorative Quarter for the U.S. Mint, it included the condor along with John Muir and the Yosemite Valley.

The California Condor Recovery Program hopes to build two wild populations, one in California and another in Arizona. Each one will have at least 150 birds and 15 breeding pairs.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Identify a few natural and human-made dangers to large birds in the wild.

Comprehension:

- Explain how the number of condors fell and has grown again in the last fifty years.

Beyond the Text:

- Why would a large utility company care about the environment?
- Name a few other animals that you know are endangered and describe the dangers that they face.
- Why do organizations like the Ventana Wildlife Society put tags on animals?

Vocabulary

Article-specific: electrical; utility company; to shrink; lead; poison/poisoning; carcass; pesticide; endangered species; to hatch; to electrocute; trench

High-use: to survive; to remove; range; habitat; to identify; recovery; to capture; to breed; to release; medical; to collide; remote; benefit

Sources

San Jose Mercury News August 18, 2011

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. **www.pgecurrents.com** August 11, 2011

Ventana Wildlife Society **www.ventanaws.org/species_condors**

Defenders of Wildlife **www.defenders.org**

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English - Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development
2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies
2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—*Intermediate and Advanced*
Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension
Writing Strategies and Applications
Listening and Speaking

Science
4.3; 7.3
9-12: Ecology; Evolution 8