

LEVELED Book • S

# Condors: Giant Birds



Written by Charlotte Welton

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## Focus Question

Why are condors well suited to live in areas with elevated landforms?



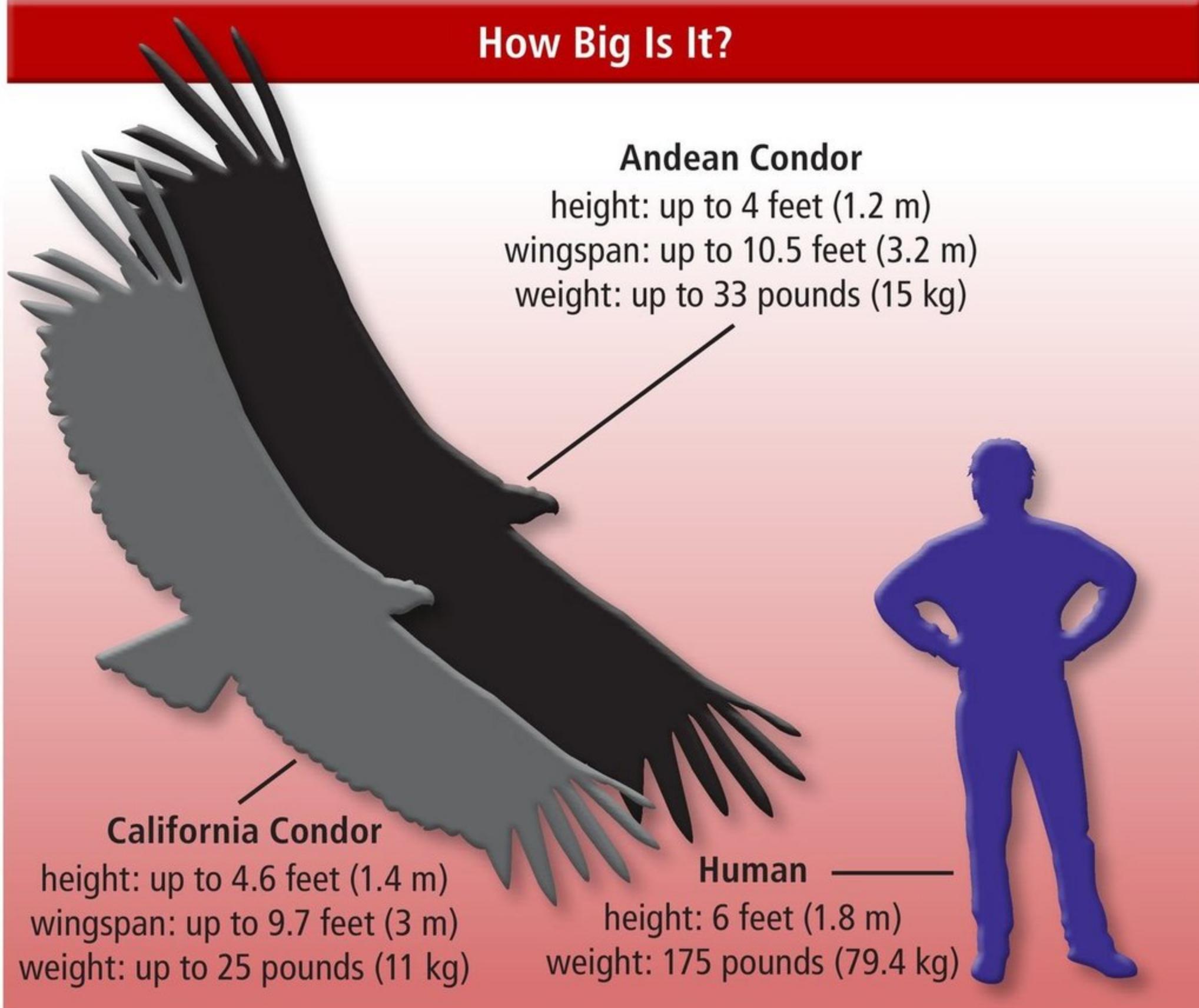
## Table of Contents

Meet the Condor .....	4
Life on Wind and Rock .....	5
Check Out the Condor .....	10
A One-Egg Nest .....	12
Condors in Trouble .....	13
A Truly Giant Bird .....	15
Glossary .....	16

## Meet the Condor

Weighing over 30 pounds (13.5 kg), an enormous bird lifts off high in the majestic Andes Mountains of South America. Its powerful wings, measuring an amazing 10.5 feet (3.2 m) across, **propel** the bird to a dizzying height of 15,000 feet (4,600 m). This is the largest flying bird in the world—the giant Andean condor. As it glides along, it uses its impressive **wingspan** and extra-keen eyesight to search for food far below.

### How Big Is It?



## Where Condors Live



### Life on Wind and Rock

Andean condors live in the western parts of South America, and California condors live in the American Southwest. All condors need a wide-open habitat so that when they spot food, they have enough space to fly down with their huge wings and land. Condors also need sufficient wind **currents** to enable them to climb high and fly long distances. These birds can fly as far as 150 miles (240 km) in one day to find food and may reach speeds of up to 50 miles per hour (80 kmph).

Some condors live near the sea, and perch high up on cliffs, which provide an excellent view of the shoreline. Most condors, however, live in dry places where they can soar above rocky canyons, deserts, and mountains.

Condors prefer to nest on elevated landforms. Lofty nests help keep condor eggs safe from potential predators on the ground. Condors don't use twigs and feathers to make an inviting, cozy nest. Instead, they nest directly on rocky cave floors or jagged outer ledges. Some California condors nest in large holes near the top of the world's tallest trees—the towering California redwoods.



In 2006, California condors (left) were found nesting in the redwoods near Big Sur. Andean condors (right) are named for the Andes Mountains they inhabit.



Andean condors feast on all kinds of animals, including llamas and alpacas.

A condor can devour up to 4 pounds (1.8 kg) of food in one day and then go for days without eating. Condors have a special diet that you wouldn't find very tasty. They only eat **carrion**—dead and decaying animals. California condors eat small mammals such as rabbits and gophers. However, they prefer to eat larger mammals such as deer and cattle. Condors feeding near the ocean clean the beaches of all kinds of seafood, from small fish to huge whales that have washed ashore.

**Decomposing** animals can be filled with harmful bacteria that can cause disease. Condors, though, have special digestive systems and are not in danger from bacteria. Condors play an important role in nature. They do an expert job of gobbling up rotting flesh and helping to keep **ecosystems** a little more germ-free.

Condors do not have a good sense of smell, but their excellent eyesight is an important tool when hunting for food. They can see their food from very high in the sky. Condors sometimes see other carrion-eating birds circling nearby—a sure sign that they've found food. This sight often leads to a condor's next meal. The condor will simply swoop in and eat the food that other birds have found.



Sharp, curved beaks help condors tear at flesh.



Normally, condors share their food. This California condor is about to feast on what's left of a humpback whale.

## What Makes a Condor a Bird?

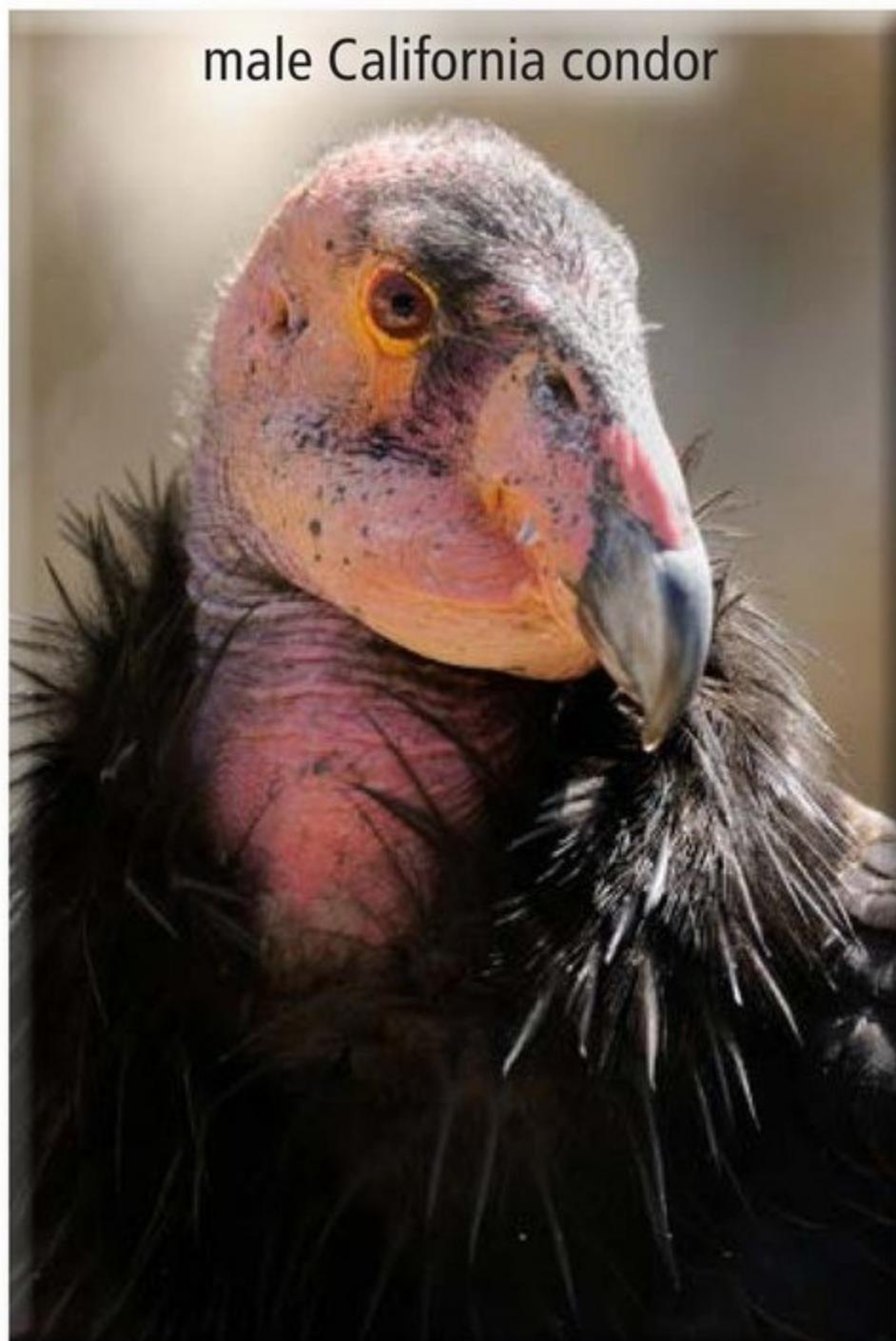


### All birds

- have a backbone
- have feathers
- have wings
- have a bill
- lay eggs
- are warm-blooded

## Check Out the Condor

There are definite similarities between adult male and female California condors—both have black feathers and fluffy black “collars” or necks. Andean males and females both have black feathers and white necks. Andean males, however, have large, fleshy lumps on their heads called *combs*. California condors don’t have combs, so when deciding which species of bird you’re looking at, check for a comb. If it’s present, it’s a male Andean condor.



male California condor



male Andean condor

When condors are excited or angry, their heads turn deep pink or orange.

**Wowser!**

- Although they look nothing alike, storks are one of the closest relatives of condors.



- Condors are squeaky-clean birds. After dining, they clean their heads on rocks and tree branches. They also bathe in water and then spend hours smoothing their feathers.

All condors have a bald head—a very useful **adaptation**. Being feather-free from the neck up makes grooming simpler for condors, especially after they stick their heads in decaying animals to feed. Condors have hardly any feathers for the messy stuff to stick to.

## A One-Egg Nest

A female condor produces just one egg every two years, so it's crucial that the egg be protected. The female and male each sit on the egg, which hatches in about fifty-six days. As the chick matures, its feathers gradually turn from gray to black. The young bird starts to fly when it is around six months old.

If they're lucky, wild condors usually live about sixty years, and condors in zoos or **refuges** can live for more than seventy-five years. Most animals, including condors, live longer in **captivity**. In these protected environments, condors are pretty pampered! In the wild, though, condors face many hazards. Sadly, one of the most damaging influences on condors has been human beings.



An Andean condor chick waits for its parents to deliver food.

## Condors in Trouble

Andean condors and California condors are endangered. Their numbers are much lower today than they were two hundred years ago. The trouble began when people started moving into areas where condors lived. Many people in North and South America didn't like the big birds, so they shot them. People also didn't like coyotes and wolves, so they left poison out to kill them. When the condors ate the dead animals, they died from the poison, too.

Many condors died of lead poisoning, too. They would feast on animals people had shot and sometimes accidentally eat lead bullets. In more recent times, electrical power has also proved a danger to condors. As sharp as condors' eyesight is, they can't always see power lines, so they fly into the wires and die.

In 1987, California condors were dangerously close to extinction—only about ten were alive in the wild. Scientists captured the wild birds and brought them to refuges. There, the scientists could protect them and help the birds raise their young.

After five years of hard work and dedication, scientists began releasing California condors back into the wild. By May 2013, over 230 California condors were flying free again.

Since 1973, similar efforts have been made in South America to save Andean condors. Organizations there have set aside land for condors. Today, their numbers are rising, and it's estimated that a few thousand birds live in the wild.



These condors have been rescued and released back into the wild. The numbered tags help researchers keep track of the birds.



A rare California condor soars above a canyon in Utah.

## A Truly Giant Bird

Can you imagine what it would be like to see such a gigantic bird fly overhead? It's an amazing sight since a condor's wingspan measures twice as wide as an eagle's and five times as wide as a falcon's! Many California condors live in protected reserves, which is one of the only places left where the huge birds fly.

Serious dangers remain for condors. But if people continue to protect these giant, high-flying birds and their environments, they will keep us in awe for centuries to come.

## Glossary

<b>adaptation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a change in an organism or species that allows it to survive better in its environment (p. 11)
<b>captivity</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the state of being confined or without freedom (p. 12)
<b>carrion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the decaying meat of a dead animal (p. 7)
<b>currents</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	air or waters that flow in a certain direction (p. 5)
<b>decomposing</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	decaying, rotting, or breaking down into small parts (p. 7)
<b>ecosystems</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	communities of living things together with their habitats (p. 7)
<b>propel</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to push somebody or something forward (p. 4)
<b>refuges</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	places of safety, comfort, or protection (p. 12)
<b>wingspan</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the distance from tip to tip of a pair of wings (p. 4)

# Words to Know

adaptation  
captivity  
carrion  
currents  
decomposing

ecosystems  
propel  
refuges  
wingspan

Front cover: The Andean Condor is the largest flying bird in the world.

Back cover: An Andean condor flies over rocky Chilean cliffs in South America.

Title page: An Andean male condor forages for food in South America.

Page 3: A rare California condor suns its enormous wings.

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