

LEVELED BOOK • Y

Condors: Giant Birds



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Focus Question

What characteristics enable condors
to survive on their unique diet?



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High in the Sky

Soaring at 15,000 feet (4,572 m), a California condor **scavenges** for food on the ground far below. It glides effortlessly on its wings that span 10 feet (3.04 m). Then it spots something—the carcass of a rabbit—and begins its slow descent. Weighing in at more than 30 pounds (13 kg), making the condor one of the largest flying birds in the world, it has little concern for predators as it lands and starts feeding on the dead animal.

For many years, very few condors were seen in the skies over California, as the giant birds hovered on the brink of extinction. Thanks to the tireless work of **conservationists** and government, these giants of the animal world are making a comeback.

How Big Is It?



Where Condors Live



Searching on the Wind

There are two species of condors and they both live in the Western Hemisphere—the California condor in the southwestern United States, and the Andean condor in western South America.

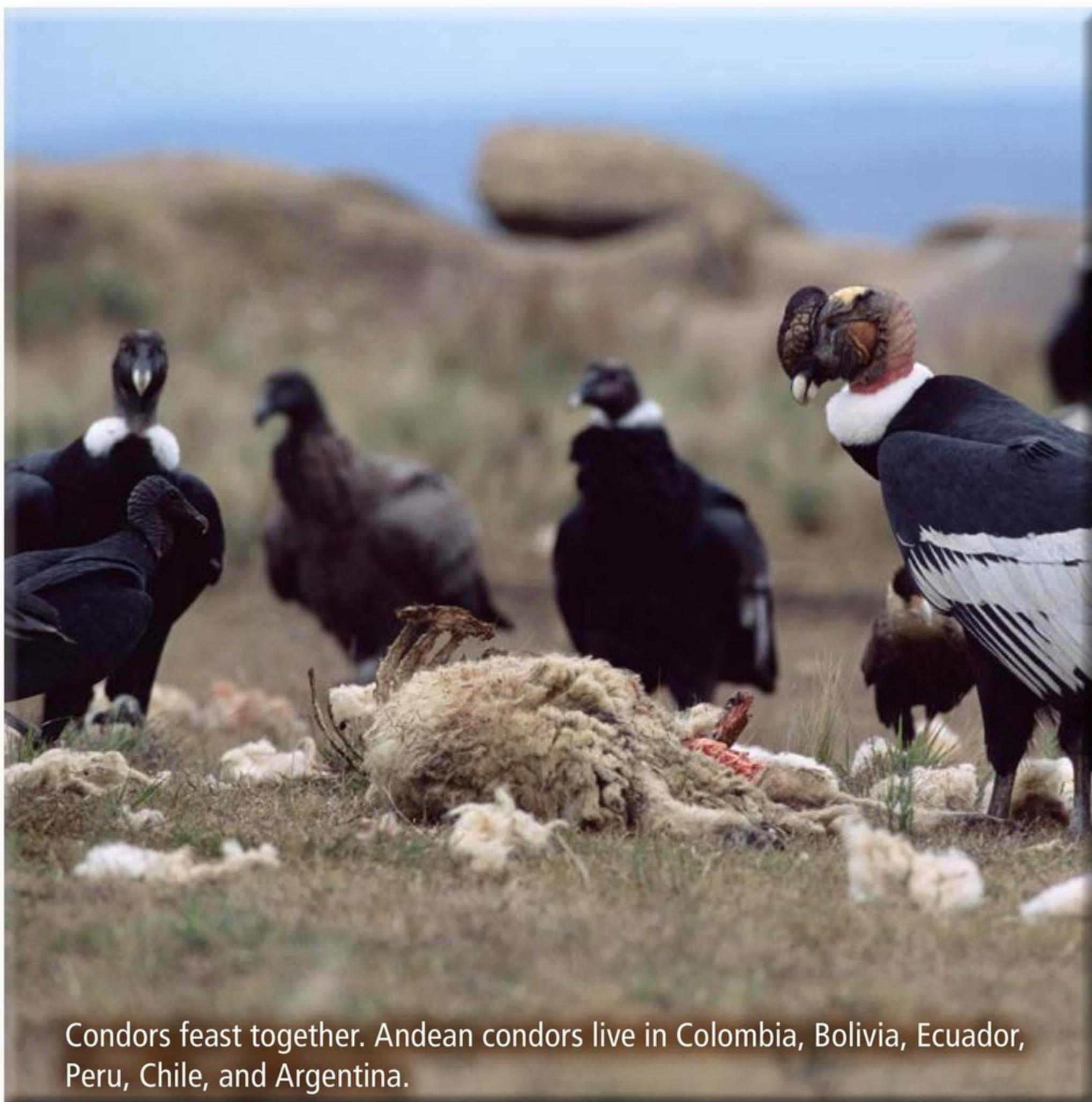
Some Andean and California condors live in coastal areas, while others live in arid inland regions. Typical condor habitats include rocky canyons, gorges, deserts, cliffs, and mountains. All these landforms serve condors well since they prefer to perch in high places. Experts have recently discovered California condors settling high in the **cavities** of giant redwoods—the world's largest trees.



Condors begin to fly when they're five or six months old. When they're two years old, they begin to search for food on their own.

Whatever regions condors inhabit, the location must meet their number one priority—their hunting requirements. They also require **thermal wind currents** or updrafts, which allow the birds to soar. Thermals are columns of warm air that flow upward, and strong updrafts can be caused when wind passes over mountains or cliffs. These conditions allow condors to fly in tight circles as they scavenge. They may fly as far as 150 miles (241 km) per day at speeds up to 50 miles per hour (80.4 kmph). Condors are capable of soaring on the wind for hours without flapping their wings.

When they're not busy flying to dizzying heights, condors are usually perched on high, rocky ledges. The **inaccessibility** of their dwellings keeps their eggs safe from flightless potential predators below.



Condors feast together. Andean condors live in Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina.

An Acquired Taste

Condors are **vultures**, a term used for all birds that eat carrion—the remains of dead animals. California condors eat rabbits, squirrels, and gophers, but they prefer larger animals such as deer, elk, and cattle. Andean condors also feast on small and large animals, including local llamas and alpacas. Condors along the coast clean beaches of dead fish, seabirds, and even the occasional whale that washes ashore.

Condors may eat 4 pounds (1.81 kg) of flesh at one time and then go for days without eating, so they must be expert scavengers. While condors don't have a good sense of smell, their eyesight is an exceptional tool that allows them to zero in on food from tremendous heights. Sometimes a condor will see other vultures circling—a sure sign that they've spotted food. The larger condor simply descends and gobbles the other birds' meal.

Carrion can be full of bacteria, which could be deadly to most living things, but condors' risk from bacterial infections is low. Condors can eat all the bacteria-infected dead animals they want and never get sick. Recent studies show that condor stomach acid is ten to one hundred times stronger than human stomach acid. The cleanup function condors provide is important to the health of the **ecosystems** where they live.

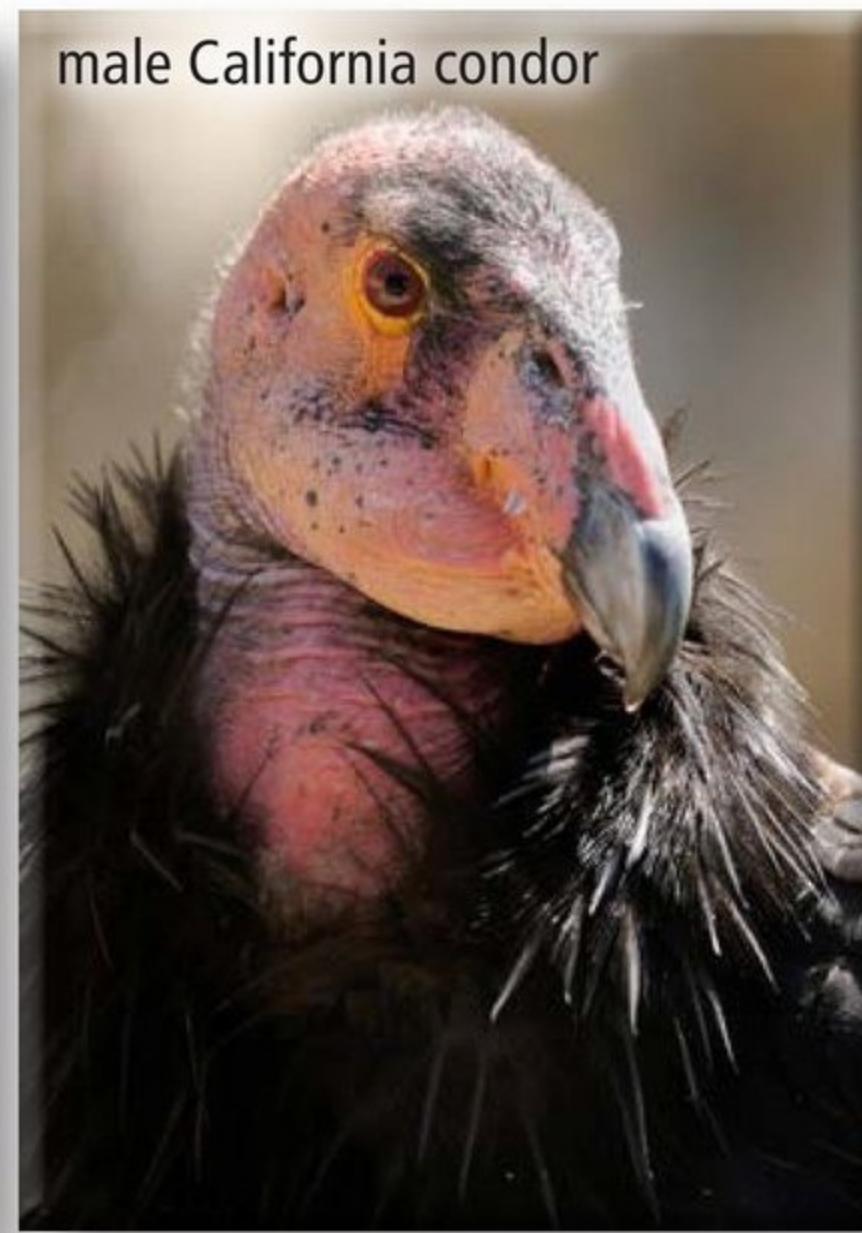
Normally, condors are social animals and share their food. This California condor is about to feast on what's left of a humpback whale.



male Andean condor



male California condor



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

Bald Is Beautiful

Up close, condors may not be considered beautiful, but they look the way they do for a reason. Condors' bare heads are specifically **adapted** for the way they eat. Few feathers make for less mess when condors stick their heads into animal carcasses—which makes washing up after a meal much easier!

The ratio of condors' light body weight to their sturdy, broad wings makes these birds expert gliders. Males are typically larger than females, but other differences depend on the species. California condors have predominantly black feathers, with fluffier black feathers at the “collar,” or neck. Andean condors are also mostly black, but with contrasting white feathers at the neck.

Andean males stand out from all other condors with a soft, fleshy growth on their heads called a *comb*. They are born with their combs, making it easy to pinpoint male chicks from females. Scientists have even learned to identify individual male birds by observing and recognizing these wrinkles on their heads.

Condors also belong to another bird category—**raptors**. Like other raptors, such as eagles and hawks, condors have sharp, hooked beaks that help them tear off pieces of flesh. Raptors also have strong legs, and most have razor-sharp **talons** to catch live prey. Condors, however, have no need to grab living animals, so their talons have adapted to their eating habits, becoming more clawlike and less sharp. Condors' talons help them balance while feeding on the ground.

wowser!

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



- After dining on a carcass, condors clean their heads on rocks and tree branches. They spend hours smoothing their feathers.



An Andean condor chick waits on a nest ledge in Ecuador for its parents to deliver food.

Handle with Care

On average, a female condor lays only one egg every two years—which is one rare and significant egg for an endangered species! Even though each egg is vitally important to the survival of the species, a condor mother doesn't build a soft nest in which to lay her egg. She lays the egg right on the hard surface of a rocky cliff or cave floor. Condor parents are diligent about protecting the precious egg. After about fifty-six days, the chick begins to hatch. It can take up to a week to completely emerge from the egg.

Both parents help feed the chick. They store food for the chick inside their throats, carry it back to the nest, and then pass the food from their bills to the chick's bill. As the chick eats and grows, its feathers gradually turn from gray to black. When the young bird is around six months old, it's ready to fly.

Condors have few predators and live long lives, usually about sixty years. In the wild, the biggest threats are from falcons and eagles, which try to snatch condor eggs. Condors live longer in captive settings, such as zoos, where some have lived for more than seventy-five years.

What Makes a Condor a Bird?



All birds

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

People and Condors

Both species of condors are endangered. The Andean condor was added to the endangered species list in 1973, and the California condor has been listed since 1967. There are some differences in their struggle for survival, but one fact is certain—humans have been among condors' biggest all-time enemies.

The numbers of California condors plunged when settlers reached the American West in the nineteenth century. At that time, these condors ranged up and down the entire Pacific coast. But many people didn't like the big birds—they thought condors were ugly and shot them. People also wanted to exterminate coyotes and wolves, so they left poison out to kill them. When the condors ate the poisoned animals, the condors perished, too.

Lead from bullets also killed many condors. Condors would eat animals that people had shot and die from lead poisoning. In more recent times, condors died from flying into electrical power lines.

These dangers have also lowered the number of Andean condors, but they face additional perils as well. Some South American villagers shoot condors because they believe the birds kill their livestock.

Astoundingly, at one time in the United States, fewer than ten California condors were alive in the wild. The species was unbelievably close to extinction. But in 1987, scientists humanely rescued them. Scientists carefully brought the condors to areas where they could safeguard the condors and help them raise their young.

After five years and great effort, scientists began releasing California condors back into the wild. They attached numbered tags on the birds' wings. These tags help the scientists know how many condors exist as well as track how they are coping. By May 2013, more than 230 California condors were flying free.

In South America, organizations have secured **reserves** for condors. They've also worked to inform the public about extinction and to clarify that condors are not hazardous to livestock. Today, it is estimated that a few thousand Andean condors survive in the wild.

Some tags on condors contain radio transmitters. They send signals showing the bird's location.





A rare California condor soars above a canyon in Utah.

A Magnificent Bird

If you extend your arms straight out from your sides, what do you suppose your “wingspan” is? Whatever the measurement, it’s probably only around half the expanse of an average condor’s wingspan.

California and Andean condors are among the most enormous flying birds in the world. They are very rare, so most of us can only imagine a giant condor elegantly sailing above. The populations of these birds were once much larger than they are today, but they are slowly making a comeback. Threats to magnificent condors still exist, but if people understand their plight, condors may be able to soar high in the sky for years to come.

Glossary

adapted (<i>v.</i>)	changed to fit a new or specific situation or environment (p. 9)
cavities (<i>n.</i>)	empty spaces inside a solid object (p. 5)
conservationists (<i>n.</i>)	people who work to protect the environment, including animals, plants, and natural resources (p. 4)
currents (<i>n.</i>)	air or water that flows in a certain direction (p. 6)
ecosystems (<i>n.</i>)	communities of living things together with their habitats (p. 8)
inaccessibility (<i>n.</i>)	the quality of being impossible or hard to reach (p. 6)
raptors (<i>n.</i>)	birds of prey (p. 10)
reserves (<i>n.</i>)	places where wild plants and animals are protected (p. 14)
scavenges (<i>v.</i>)	finds and eats scraps of garbage or animals that are already dead (p. 4)
talons (<i>n.</i>)	claws on the feet of birds such as owls, hawks, and eagles (p. 10)
thermal (<i>adj.</i>)	of, relating to, or caused by heat (p. 6)
vultures (<i>n.</i>)	large birds of prey that are scavengers, feeding mostly on dead animals (p. 7)

Words to Know

adapted
cavities
conservationists
currents
ecosystem
inaccessibility

raptors
reserves
scavenges
talons
thermal
vultures

Front cover: A condor searches for food along the California coast.

Back cover: A California Condor at the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona

Title page: Condors like to perch and nest in high and rocky places.

Page 3: Condors make use of air currents as they search for food.

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