



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE VENTANA WILDLIFE SOCIETY, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

California condors, once near extinction, have been gaining in number under breeding efforts.

Another Way Lead Kills Condors

By MALIA WOLLAN

KING CITY, Calif. — Bruce Robertson, a private detective, had little to go on. Two gunshot victims, one soon to be dead, both found in the Big Sur wilderness. The victims had brown eyes, ruddy faces and nine-foot wingspans.

Ordinarily Mr. Robertson, of Los Angeles, hunts down philandering husbands and ferrets out insurance violators. But his skills are being tested in this latest mystery: the shootings of two endangered California condors.

“It’s a tough case,” said Mr. Robertson, 58. “The shooter could be anywhere.”

Biologists have been coaxing condors back from the brink of extinction since the early 1980s, when just 22 birds remained. Since then, the California condor count has been steadily climbing. The current tally is 336, with more than half of those living in the wild in Arizona, Baja California, California and Utah, and the rest living in zoos and bird sanctuaries. Those in the wild wear numbered ID tags and radio transmitters for tracking.

In March, scientists captured the two ill-looking condors, which were full of shotgun pellets. In addition, Condor 286, known as Pinns (because he was one of the oldest condors released at Pinnacles National Monument), and Condor 375 suffered from lead poisoning that biologists believe to be a result of eating bullet-laced animal carcasses left by hunters.

While the shotgun pellets lodged in the birds concerned scientists, it was the lead in their blood that proved more deadly. On May 11, Pinns died of lead poisoning at the Los Angeles Zoo. Condor 375 recovered and was released back into the wild.

News of two lead-riddled condors set phones ringing at environmental groups’ offices across the West.

“It was really distressing to me,” said Peter Galvin, a founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson. “As soon as I heard, I knew we needed to get a dragnet and resources out there to capture this shooter.”

Within 48 hours, Mr. Robertson

was on the case — at the invitation of the center — and environmental groups, foundations and the state government had raised \$40,500 in reward money for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the gunman or gunmen. Violation of the federal Endangered Species Act can result in a year in jail and a \$100,000 fine.

Mr. Robertson logged over 1,000 miles on his car. He stopped at diners, gas stations and bars, from the craggy Big Sur coast eastward to the Pinnacles National Monument. He questioned men in tiny communities with names like Bitterwater. Occasionally, Mr. Robertson pulled over to talk condors and guns with ranch hands.

His first stop in King City, some 150 miles south of San Francisco, was a one-room gun shop tucked behind a roadside liquor store.

A threat continues for an endangered species despite a protective ban.

When he goes undercover, Mr. Robertson said, he tries to “keep the lies to a minimum.” So on this day he was just Bruce, a nature photography buff with a thing for really big birds.

“I want to photograph some wildlife,” Mr. Robertson told the gun shop owner. “Know where I can find wild pigs or elk or condors around here?”

The men got to discussing a new state ban on lead bullets, and the gun shop owner expressed his disgust with it.

The ban was instituted in July in condor territory, which stretches along the coastal ranges from Silicon Valley south to Los Angeles County. “Lead poisoning is the No. 1 threat to these birds,” said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the nonprofit Ventana Wildlife Society, which raises, cares for and releases condors in Big Sur.

Condors scavenge for dead ani-

mals and often feast on the carrion of deer, pigs and squirrels shot — often with lead bullets — by hunters or ranchers. Fourteen condors have died from lead poisoning in California and 12 more in Utah and Arizona since the condor conservation program began in 1982. Dozens of poisoned birds have undergone blood transfusions, been given medication and been fed intravenously.

Mr. Sorenson is concerned that the timing of the condor shootings coincides with the lead-bullet ban. “There are clearly some people out there that are really angry and upset,” he said.

Mr. Robertson also said he thought that anger over the ban might have played a role in the shootings. When he asked a rancher near Pinnacles National Monument if he had seen any condors, the man replied that he had shot them all and that the birds’ eggs were pretty tasty, too.

This weekend Mr. Robertson plans to shed his undercover guise and begin distributing wanted posters on doorsteps, telephone poles and in mailboxes and gun shops across the Central Coast. The posters highlight the cash reward and ask anyone with information to call an 800 number or send an e-mail message.

“People will start talking when they find out about the money,” he said.

The posters rankle federal Fish and Wildlife Service officials. “It would be much better if people with information contacted law enforcement officials trained to handle such information in the proper way,” said Alex Pitts, an agency spokeswoman.

Law enforcement officials from the agency and from the California Department of Fish and Game and local sheriff’s offices are conducting their own investigation into the condor shootings. “I hope if he finds information he gives it to our investigators,” Ms. Pitts said of Mr. Robertson.

Meanwhile, Mr. Robertson has drawn a red circle on his map where he thinks the shooting occurred. “There’s definitely smoke around here,” he said steering around tortuous turns east of King City. “And where there’s smoke, there’s always fire.”



GENARO MOLINA/LOS ANGELES TIMES

Bruce Robertson was hired to find the shooter of Condor 286, right, one of two found riddled with shotgun pellets.

