

The Condor's Shadow

A story of endangered species recovery



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***The Condor's Shadow* - Log Line:**

An emotional and engaging narrative that profiles the environmental success story of the California condor, *The Condor's Shadow* reveals the challenges that remain and the work underway to ensure the species survival.

***The Condor's Shadow* - Short Synopsis**

A beautiful and revealing story of endangered species recovery, *The Condor's Shadow* profiles the ongoing work of reestablishing the iconic California condor in Southern California. The film features a bold and feisty condor named Pitahsi and a larger-than-life biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Joseph Brandt. Together they reveal the passion required to sustain the California condor in a world that defies the bird's prehistoric origins. Thirty years after a heroic effort commenced to recover the species we can celebrate this story of endangered species recovery. In spite of this success, the California condor's future is not quite secure. The film explores how human preferences prevent the largest North American land bird from flying free. *The Condor's Shadow* is a moving story of environmental challenge, passionate conservationists, and a beautiful soaring bird.

***The Condor's Shadow* - Synopsis**

The Condor's Shadow is a beautiful environmental documentary on the ongoing challenge of recovering the iconic California condor. In the same way that the polar bear has become a symbol of what we will lose if we ignore the warming of the planet, the California condor was a symbol of the environmental degradation in the 1980's. Just twenty-two California condors remained on earth in 1982. Today, the population has been restored to over four hundred birds. It's a story that has made international headlines - an environmental success story. But the condor is not out of the woods quite yet. Biologist Joseph Brandt, zookeeper Mike Clark and toxicologist Myra Finkelstein as well as a feisty condor named Pitahsi all contribute to the narrative in this year-in-the-life documentary of endangered species recovery. With stunning vérité footage of biologists rappelling down into cliff-side nests in the ruggedly beautiful condor habitat of Southern California, the action in the film provides a window into the extreme lengths biologists go to in the restoration of the species. Conservationists who have lived the condor's dilemma since the program's inception, share stories that will make you appreciate the passion required to pull a species back from the brink. In the zoos where the species was bred out of a genetic bottleneck and in the labs where the environmental threats were established, *The Condor's Shadow* takes you into a world where endangered species restoration is made real. *The Condor's Shadow* is a revealing parable on the unintentional consequences of human preferences on ecosystems. It's a hopeful story of a very large bird and an exploration of the very small changes that remain to be made to enable the California condor to once again fly free.

Biologist Joseph Brandt, a tall and gregarious character on his sixth year with the condor program leads us into the remote back country where California condors have nested for thousands of years. Joseph introduces a condor pair that he manages in his role as lead field biologist with the California Condor recovery program. The work with the birds is difficult and gritty and the treks into the wilderness to reach their habitat can be grueling. Despite this, Joseph is a man who loves his work and he shares with us his passion for the birds. Entering into the nest of a condor named Pitahsi, we gain an understanding of just what conservationists are up against in attempting to encourage wild nesting by these enormous soaring birds. With a wingspan that can approach ten feet and commonly weighing twenty-five pounds, this is an animal that commands respect within its element.

The film places the Condor's recovery in the context of the very first endangered species recovery program initiated after the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Peter Alagona Ph.D., an environmental historian and Assistant Professor of Environmental studies at the University of California Santa Barbara places the condor recovery effort in the framework of environmental history.

With the help of Jesse Grantham, the condor recovery program's coordinator through the most difficult years of rescue and reintroduction, the film also explores the four phases of the condor recovery program's progression:

- Phase one, the rescue, where the last remaining condors were taken out of the wild to be placed in protective custody.
- Phase two, propagating the species with captive breeding in the zoos.
- Phase three, the reintroduction begun in 1992 of the captive-bred birds to the wild.
- Phase four, where we are today. The restoration of nesting back within their historic range. A species that teetered at the brink of extinction with just twenty-two individuals in the 1980's has been restored to over four hundred birds today.

The narrative in *The Condor's Shadow* follows the story of a condor named Pitahsi. The original birds bred at the Los Angeles and San Diego Zoos were given Chumash Native American names befitting of their prehistoric origins. For the Chumash, a people that inhabited the coastal regions of California near what is now Santa Barbara, Pitahsi means "the power within". It's a fitting name for the central condor in the film as her bold personality creates some interesting moments with biologist Joseph over the course of the story. Inquisitive and intelligent animals, California condors lay just a single egg as infrequently as every other year. They nest in open rock cavities and the biologists go to great lengths to ensure nesting success. For Pitahsi and her mate, their nest occurs on a canyon wall in the rugged Los Padres National Forest. We visit the nest multiple times in the film and watch as the offspring grows from a fuzz ball at hatch to a twenty-pound bird over the nesting season. The hatchling, named condor 599, has an interesting genesis provoked by an unexpected twist in the story that makes for some entertaining and moving sequences in the film. The humor of the events that unfold soften the edge of the hard realities that define the condor recovery story. Much of the film is not quite so light. It's a documentary of the condor recovery program as it stands today and the film is crafted to weave together the biology and the science of conservation between some amazing segments of the birds in the field and the biologists that care for them.

What began as a wildlife story evolved during production of *The Condor's Shadow* into an exploration of commitment, passion and the challenges of endangered species recovery. The remaining environmental challenge for the condor is exposure to lead. As scavengers, condors pickup lead fragments in the remains of hunter-shot game. The lead issue creates a huge unresolved barrier to ultimate success with the condor program and with that issue the film took on a purpose. Raising awareness of the issue with lead in the environment is a potentially polarizing concept for many in the hunting community. The irony is that hunting is of tremendous benefit to the condor as it provides a food source for the birds in the wild lands they call home. The shared resource of wild places, enjoyed by hunters, nature lovers and many of the creatures that predate our presence on the landscape make the awareness of our not so obvious impacts critically important. The use of alternative forms of ammunition that do not contain lead is the solution. It's a simple change, not without cost but one well worth the effort. The film seeks to articulate that message.

Background

California Condor Recovery Program and the Endangered Species Act

The strongest federal safeguard against the extinction of bird species in the United States is the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The ESA permits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list bird species clearly heading toward extinction as endangered. Such a listing requires the Secretary of the Interior to designate critical habitat for the survival and recovery of the species and obligates federal agencies or any entity receiving federal funding to avoid “adverse modification” of critical habitat, through their own actions and through activities that are federally approved or funded.

The California condor was on the very first endangered species list, referred to as the “Class of 67”. Congress directed the creation of the 1967 list after the passage of the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. After the passage of the 1973 Act, the very first recovery program undertaken on behalf of a listed species was the program for the California condor. Although controversy has sometimes surrounded the listing of species and the conservation of their habitats, the Endangered Species Act has been a clear success story: Conservation has kept fully 99 percent of species listed in the past three decades from becoming extinct. The California condor is a prime example of what can be done when the resources and commitment are applied to restoration of a threatened species.

Many private interests with strong political connections find the ESA to be inconvenient and attempts to undermine the strength of the Act arise periodically. The Endangered Species Act is itself endangered and awareness building through films like *The Condor’s Shadow* aim to raise awareness of the conservation successes the ESA has made possible.

The Characters

Joseph Brandt

Supervising Field Biologist, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Joseph Brandt is the principle storyteller in *The Condor's Shadow*. The field manager of the Southern California Condor Recovery Program, Joseph is a larger-than-life kind of a guy - literally, at 6"6" he's an impressive character in person as well as onscreen. We follow him and his field team over a yearlong journey into the gritty side of endangered species recovery. Passionate and at the same time pragmatic about the condor's recovery, Joseph is one of those rare individuals that relishes the most difficult of challenges found every day in field work. If you ever thought it would be fun to be a biologist, you'll appreciate Joseph Brandt. As his collaborator in the condor recovery effort, Joe Burnett, described him..." he's a guy that's in it for the birds".



A graduate of the University of Oregon, Joseph Brandt has worked with grizzly bears in Montana, sea birds on the Columbia River and with penguins below the equator. He initially became engaged with the condor recovery effort as a seasonal biologist with the [Ventana Wildlife Society](#) in Big Sur, California. After a stint in Southern Chile ("...just me, two Chileanos and one-hundred thousand penguins") he took a biologist position with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Now the lead field biologist for the Service's Condor Recovery Program, the film follows Joseph on a year-in-the-life story of condor recovery. A gregarious individual, Joseph has an extensive background in rock climbing. As condors never nest anywhere convenient to humans, this is a skill set used routinely in his job. A taskmaster and arguably the exact kind of personality that makes an endangered species recovery effort like this one possible. Joseph shares his passion for the condor in a way that will make you appreciate the beauty of one of the rarest birds on earth.

Michael Clark

Zookeeper California Condor Recovery Program, Los Angeles Zoo

Mike Clark has been with the Los Angeles Zoo for over twenty years. Originally drawn to the Zoo to work with raptors, Mike has gained an uncanny level of intimacy into the behavioral characteristics of the California condor. A funny and unbelievably dynamic character, Mike frequently contributes his knowledge of the condor to the field crews up and down the state.

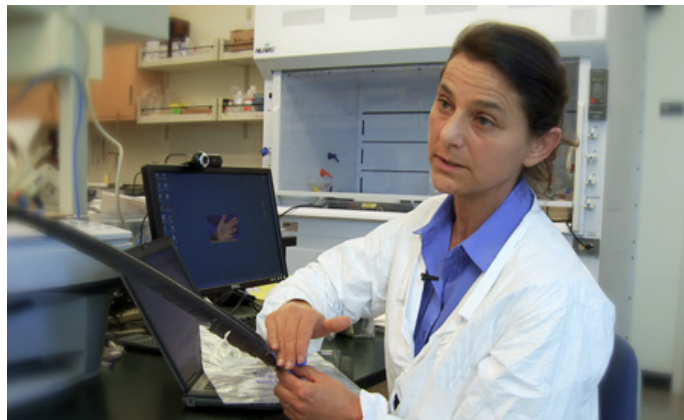


He may be just as likely be found on rappel into a precipitous cliff-side condor nest as he would be in the Zoo. On a single 24 hour period we witnessed him doing a nest entry in Big Sur, returning the 300 miles to LA only to board a plane bound to Boise, Idaho for an egg swap with the Peregrine Fund condor program. His energy and humor boundless, Mike is another character in the program driven by a passion to make a difference with the condor. His role in our story really carries the weight of the condor's issue with lead toxicity. It is he and his fellow keepers at the LA Zoo that bear the brunt of this ugly reality in recovering the California condor.

Myra Finkelstein, Ph.D.

**Researcher, Department of Microbiology and Environmental Toxicology
U.C. Santa Cruz**

Myra Finkelstein is the lead researcher at the University of California Santa Cruz responsible for the pivotal research that definitively connects the dots between lead ammunition and lead toxicosis in condors. With a Ph.D. in environmental toxicology, Myra has brought significant experience to her research on the effects of lead on wildlife.



In California condors' Myra's research establishes a number of significant facts including how contaminant exposure affects the physiology of individuals and how this translates to create population-level impacts. Her research utilizes the isotopic signature of lead found in both poisoned birds and lead ammunition to establish the frequency and severity of lead exposure in the California condor.

Michael Mace**Curator, San Diego Zoo's Safari Park**

Michael Mace is curator of birds for the San Diego Zoo's Safari Park. His responsibilities include management of the Avian Department and he has participated in the condor recovery effort since its inception. The ground-breaking work in captive breeding of California condors fell under Mike's purvey during the early years of the program.



Also significant to the condor recovery program was Michael Walsh, originally of the Los Angeles Zoo and then later at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park who made propagating the species in captivity a success for the bird. The master database for every condor on earth (the condor "Studbook") is managed by Mike Mace and his team at the Safari Park.

Bruce Rideout, Ph.D.**Zoological Society of San Diego**

Bruce Rideout is a pathologist and disease-investigation specialist for the Zoological Society of San Diego (San Diego Zoo and San Diego Safari Park). He is board certified in the specialty of veterinary pathology.



Dr. Rideout came to the Zoological Society of San Diego in 1991, where he is now head of the Wildlife Disease Laboratories and associate director of conservation and research for endangered species. In the film, Dr. Rideout provides a window into the source and effect of lead on condors. His department's responsibilities for the Zoological Society of San Diego is to conduct post-mortem necropsy on condors that have died both in the Zoo's and in the field. His conclusion after 20+ years of working with condors is that those who have died from lead exposure have succumbed to it after exposure to fragments of lead ammunition. No other plausible source of lead has ever been discovered to have lead to a condor death.

Jam Hamber**Naturalist, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History**

A member of the condor recovery team since the 1970's, Jan began her contribution to the field research on the California condor with naturalist, Dick Smith well prior to the inception of the federal effort to save the species. Trained as a biologist at Cornell, she today manages an archive of California condor research and field observations that dates back over a hundred years. Jan is so passionate about the restoration of the condor back within its historic range that she still volunteers with tracking of the birds in the field today. "My goal has always been to save the species..." relates Jan. She appears in *The Condor's Shadow* in a pivotal scene where she reads from her field observation journal and recounts the capture of the last wild condor, AC-9 on Easter Sunday in 1987. The segment is a moving testament to the underlying passion that is foundational to the entire California condor recovery program.

Anthony Prieto**Hunter, Non-lead Ammunition Activist**

Anthony Prieto grew up in Southern California in a family with a long tradition of hunting. He was taught from a young age to take only what was needed to feed his family and to respect the interdependency of all things in nature. Exposed to the California condor as an elementary school student,



Anthony developed an appreciation for the species as a wild creature that lived close to his family home. With his father and maternal grandfather as role models, his hunting experience began to develop in the early 1980's. By 1986, Anthony knew that the last few California condors remaining on earth flew free in the same mountains where he enjoyed hunting. It was at this point that his two passions of wildlife conservation and hunting joined to become one. As the connection between spent-lead ammunition in the gutpile remains of hunter-shot game and the extinction of the condor became firmly established, Anthony decided to become a part of the solution. At first he was forced to bury or remove the remains of his game kills. Later, as non-lead ammunition became available, he switched over to use the less toxic rounds exclusively. In 2002 he joined with biologists Jan Hamber, Paul Andreano and Nick Todd to form Project Gutpile. A outreach organization they developed to raise awareness of the lead issue. The group continues to do outreach today in Southern California. Anthony resides in Santa Barbara, California and can be reached at 805-729-5455 or via email: apr1eto805@gmail.com

Condor 247

Sire, 10 year old Male California Condor

Condor 247 hatched at the San Diego Safari Park in August of 2002. Condor 247 came of age quickly and shown himself as a dominant bird in Southern California flock. This dominance has proved itself to be worthwhile with his courtship and pairing of the much older female Pitahsi. He mated with Pitahsi in late 2007 and with help from the biologists and the LA Zoo has fostered three chicks in the wild with Pitahsi including condor 599, featured in the film.

Condor 79 - Pitahsi

20 year old Female California Condor

Condor 79 was given the Chumash indian name "Pitahsi" when she hatched at the LA Zoo in 1992. A bird that reveals the true challenge of the recovery program, Pitahsi is unusually bold and works aggressively to defend her nest from the biologist's interventions. Originally released in the fall of 1992, Pitahsi was recaptured after a few short months as she engaged in behaviors that threatened her safety.



Pitahsi would spend the next 12 years in the Los Angeles Zoo, where she would produce three offspring. She was finally re-released at Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge in November 2006. In 2008, she mated with younger male, condor 247 and has three failed nest attempts in the wild. An unfortunate side-effect of sub-lethal exposure to lead are reproductive problems in birds. While it's impossible to say that lead has been the source of her the problem eggs she has laid since being released, what we can say is that she has certainly been exposed to lead repeatedly. She spent over a month in chelation treatment in December of 2011 after testing "high" during a routine trap up. Pitahsi and 247 fostered two zoo-bred chicks since 2008 including condor 599 and raised a third foster chick on the refuge in 2012.

Condor 599

Juvenile Female California Condor

Condor 599 is the foster chick of condors 247 and 79 - AKA "Pitahsi". In the film we follow this chick over the first year of her life. From hatch at the LA Zoo, to a nest on the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge and through fledging to become a wild condor. It's a remarkable transition watching a hatchling become a twenty pound bird.

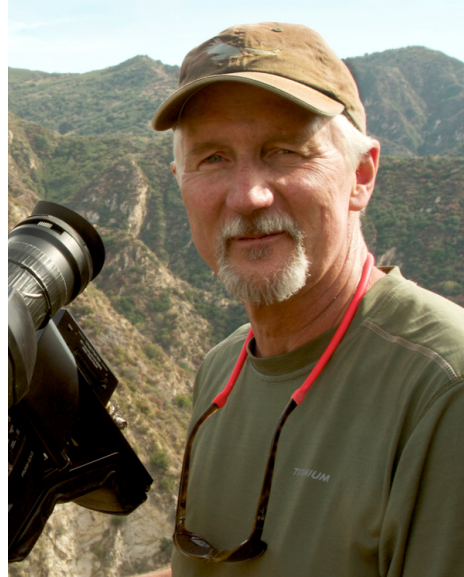


Even more remarkable with this one given that she began life at the Zoo before being "hatched again" in a nest cavity on a mountainside. A compelling window into the do-all-possible passion that goes into rebuilding a self-sustaining population of the California condor.

Producer & Director: Jeff McLoughlin

Documentary Filmmaker

Jeff McLoughlin is a documentary filmmaker with a twenty-year career in commercial media production for Fortune 1000 companies in the United States and Europe. He left the corporate world behind in 2010 to pursue documentary filmmaking. Inspired by an article on the California condor recovery program written by Matt Kettmann in the [Santa Barbara Independent](#), Jeff set out to expand upon the condor story in film. A lifelong backpacker and fly fisherman with an affinity for wild places, Jeff is at home in the California backcountry. The opportunity to produce a film on an environmental issue with huge effect on an keystone species made the project a natural fit.



What began as a wildlife story evolved during production of *The Condor's Shadow* into an exploration of commitment, passion and the challenges of endangered species recovery. The remaining environmental challenge for the condor is exposure to lead. As scavengers, condors pickup lead fragments in the remains of hunter-shot game. The lead issue creates a huge unresolved barrier to ultimate success with the condor program and with that issue the film took on a purpose. Drive awareness and stimulate the conversation about the role of the hunter as conservationist. From the initial research for the film begun in the summer of 2010, *The Condor's Shadow* has been a two and a half year journey. Self-produced, the film will appear in community screenings across the U.S. and is projected to have a healthy lifetime in educational venues worldwide. In a world of less optimistic environmental stories, *The Condor's Shadow* reveals the beauty of an environmental success-story-in-the-making.

The Condor's Shadow is just the first of a planned series on environmental issues to be produced by Good Eye Films. Jeff McLoughlin resides in Santa Barbara, California and can be reached at 1-805-451-1096 or via email: jeff@gooddyefilms.com

Additional resources can be found at www.theCondorsShadow.com/press.html