

COPY

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May 11, 1953

The Honorable A. A. Erhart
California State Senator
Capitol Building
Sacramento, California

Dear Al:

Thank you for your letter of May 6, and the enclosed article which I had not previously read and which was very interesting.

The tragic feature of Mr. Walker's article is that it could completely mislead people who would read it without knowing the real history of this case or the actual status of condors.

Its general discrepancy and inaccuracy is typified in the first paragraph with the statement: "A few weeks ago the imminent hatching of condor eggs forced me to cease the attempt to trap a breeding pair" As all of us who are familiar with this case know, he ceased trapping operations only when his permit was suspended by the authorities at your urging, after he had been trapping for a month or more during a time when condor eggs would normally be hatching.

It is interesting to note the change in the arguments used to justify this project to cage condors. Their earlier contentions were that an abundance of condors made the taking of a single pair, of insignificant loss to the total population. I have good reason to believe that the permit was originally issued on the opinion of the Bureau of Game Conservation that condors were plentiful. As you may recall, Al, this attitude was confirmed in a letter I received last January from the editorial department of the "California Farmer" which included the statement: "The Fish and Game Division informs us that they would actually estimate the number of condors in existence at more than 150."

Now when our claims are confirmed that this estimate of the condor population was over optimistic and erroneous, without a word of explanation as to this previous ignorance, we are suddenly faced with an approach, by the same people, from the extreme opposite point of view ---- that condors are scarcer than we realize and that the present program for their survival is hopeless and should be abandoned. To stand firmly on fact and reason and cope with such inconsistency and vagary is putting our side to quite a test. It will be interesting to see whether the Department will follow this contradictory and ridiculous change in strategy.

Mr. Walker in getting no more than 12 birds to come to his bait in comparison to 34 birds seen in the same area in 1934, claims this to be an indication of the trend in condor population. Such meagre data applying only to one particular location are insignificant.

Accurate research has proved that condors move about with a changing food supply, over a region which extends into Monterey and Madera Counties on the north to Ventura on the south and inland to the Sierra Nevada. While Mr. Walker was observing the birds near Fillmore, a condor was seen near the Pozo Dam in this county in February, and my brother saw three in March as he was driving along the highway between Bakersfield and Tehachapi. Condors are rare around Cholame in the winter but are commonly seen there during the summer. For the most part they remain obscure, in the most remote and inaccessible parts of their range, as far as possible from the sight of human beings. With 12 condors at Mr. Walker's bait, some of which probably had mates that at the same time were incubating eggs in nests near there, and with other condors such as those noted above, distributed throughout the condor range, I see no reason to change our original estimate of 60 to 65 birds as being the total population.

This article also presents the exact opposite of what is actually the case in reference to deer as condor food. It claims that the refuge by eliminating hunters and the deer they cripple, and the trapping of lions with the loss to condors of deer carcasses left by lions, has brought on starvation of the condors. Actually the 35,000 acre refuge, an area roughly $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles square, is but a small dot on a map of the area over which condors range for food. The birds have been followed when they flew 40 miles from roost to feeding ground. Also, deer have increased tremendously in recent years in the condor range and it is a foregone conclusion that more deer die now from starvation, disease and other causes than were available as food for condors, then were crippled by hunters or killed by lions in 1934.

The failure of a large number of condors to concentrate at Mr. Walker's bait could actually indicate a favorable situation -- a well distributed and ample supply of condor food and a corresponding distribution of the birds. I would say that his failure to attract more than 12 condors can be attributed more reasonably to the fact that condors are well fed than that they are starving.

Mr. Walker's idea that the condor population should be deported to some island is about the most fantastic development to appear yet in this fiasco. In view of such a proposition it is incredible how the authorities have been taken in by this scheme.

In regard to his latest, and pessimistic idea that condors are doomed, I will give you a brief outline of what has actually occurred in this area of San Luis Obispo County during the last generation. My father homesteaded near Shandon in 1884 and lived here until his death in 1935. Interested in natural history and an active hunter he never saw a condor. My brother and I first became acquainted with condors when, as boys, we accompanied a local egg collector, Fred Truesdale, on his annual expeditions into the mountains west of the Carrissa Plains to rob a particular pair of condors which nested there. A condor egg at that time was worth \$300. Truesdale, who now lives in Santa Margarita, took five condor eggs during the period from 1908 to 1920. In all his searching and watching he never saw more than 5 condors at once. In this same nesting territory in 1947, accompanied by 4 other persons, I saw 14 of the birds rise from their roosts and soar off toward the Carrissa Plains.

Truesdale grew up in the Shandon-Cholame area and lived there until about 1920. An observing ornithologist, always on the lookout for birds, he never saw a condor in the Shandon-Cholame area where they are now commonly seen, at times in groups of as many as 22 birds.

The last robbing of a condor nest by Truesdale in 1920, marked the end of an era in which this and other types of human depredation almost exterminated the entire species. I firmly believe there are more condors today than there were in 1920. Since that time, mainly through the right kind of publicity and education a protective attitude has been established under which the birds are held inviolate and are no longer molested. The steady increase of condors in this region that has occurred with this program of total protection is in my opinion conclusive evidence that the program is a success. In view of this I can see no reason why we should turn the welfare of condors and the results of a generation of progress -- the work of our most stalwart conservationists, over to a handful of zoo keepers and bird fanciers who obviously have not the slightest conception of the real purpose of saving condors.

One of the most regrettable factors in this controversy is that the findings of an extensive scientific study of condors carried out by Dr. Carl Koford of the University of California is just now in the process of being printed and as yet is not available to the public. One of the principle issues of this controversy is that this factual research was not used as a source of information by the authorities in allowing this caging project but instead, random observations and supposition have been the basis of decision.

Also Al, as a matter of general principal we are obliged to support the philosophy that such things as condors can and should be saved, and by the same token we must oppose the dangerous philosophy that hope of accomplishing this is futile. It can be argued that mankind is also doomed!

Thanking you again for your interest and cooperation in this matter and looking forward to when we can get together for a good discussion of the whole problem, I remain yours

With best personal regards,

Ian I. McMillan

cc: Frank Pitelka
Sandy Sprunt

*Dear Bill: Senator Erhardt
asked me to comment on a recent article
in the L. A. Times about the condor trapping. I
am sending you this reply. I/I. McMillan.*