



KELLY'S CORNER

by Jan Kelly

Mass Audubon in Wellfleet had an unusual, once-in-a-lifetime demonstration lecture on Earth Day this year. A captivated audience viewed and learned about the Andean Condor. Less endangered today than fifty years ago, due to the efforts of many dedicated people who have displayed the many skills needed to help a species survive—mucking out a cage, clearing a driveway or field from snow to simulate a runway, writing treatises and newspaper articles, meeting with environmental groups and with politicians, appearing before congress, bird in hand, and the luxury of public viewing at concerts, Earth Day, Condor Festivals, schools and any group interested in this ancient, fascinating looking and behaving bird. Not your bird-feeder level at all!

Call the condor we met "Veedor," meaning *overseer*—an Indian word from Inca history. "Seeing" combined with Castilian spanish. John McNeely, Veedor's keeper, species advocate and advocate for the threatened species habitat, explained that an overseer would check a peasant's work much as the condor surveys from above, hovering, seeing all.

Veedor's grandparents were captured in 1971 to breed in captivity. Because Veedor was among the young who were raised by human intervention with direct contact, he has the human imprint and so could not survive in the wild. Veedor was given away as were the others of this experiment when funding became too low. A very eager and grateful John McNeely took up the loving task of caring for Veedor. They have been together eleven years and it has been a great adventure of hard work, learning and satisfaction for both bird and man.

John McNeely already had much experience with birds of prey. In 1979-80 he hand trained a red-tailed hawk. John was one of the first hanggliders in the northeast and had many close encounters with soaring birds. His curiosity and sense of purpose grew. He trained a golden eagle to fly with him on the glider—impressive! He showed slides of this and every person in the audience was affected. When John heard

of the plight of the condors born in captivity he realized his next step in this protective mission. From bird of prey he moved to the passivity of a scavenger species. He was awarded an opportunity to reeducate the public's thinking on this much maligned bird.

We viewed a tabloid headline "Giant Condor Attacks Plane—Passengers Are Fed To Young!"—complete with mocked-up photographs. The bird pictured was not a condor but a stuffed eagle. The article presented the popular and erroneous image of the condor as a stupid, ugly, dirty living fossil—dangerous, harmful, unscrupulous.

In fact the condor is not a bird of prey but a scavenger, nor does it kill its meal but cleans up the leftover kill of others. Condors have no talons and a weak grasp. They are meat eaters and if fed vegetable matter will not ingest the food. A scavenger has no feathers on its head, the easier to clean up once they finish feeding. Most scavengers have reddish head skin. You might note the Turkey Buzzards soaring over your heads these days. Route 6, a prime roadkill site for scavengers, offers the easiest viewing spot. The heat of the macadam causes updrafts creating thermals and making it easy for the birds to glide.

The Andean Condor, the National bird for six countries in South America, has the biggest wing area of all birds—9 1/2 feet. The albatross wing is longer, but thinner. The eyes of the condor are seven times more powerful than ours. Bernardo O'Higgins who freed Chile has an impressive monument in Valparaiso, Chile which he shares with the condor, the "King of Birds." The legend of the Patchakanak people details their relationship with the Condor. Many of the coins of Latin America carry the Condor image. There is even a syndicated cartoon with an environmental message called "Condorito" featuring a reader-friendly teaching condor.

The Condor has a spooky, though friendly quality. Its vascular system differs from that of other birds and the

Day of the Condor



Condor has no voice box. The Condor uses body language and nibbles to get its message across. With poor pectoral muscles, it needs an open area to become airborne. The valleys of South America provide their habitat for flying. The Coco River Canyon in Peru, the deepest canyon in the world, is a happy spot for flying but when above a valley the condor can be easily targeted and is people shoot the condor for food, though it is their national bird. The pantheistic Indians held the condor as a demi-god, along with the bull and held elaborate ceremonies involving both animals in ritualistic sacrifice. The Spanish conquerors influenced change by condemning this worship and sacrifice as blasphemous. They still hold token ceremonies where the animals are released, but sacrifice still goes on. In Venezuela where the Andean Condor was extinct, four condors were released in a beautiful area of valleys and mountain ranges. The mayor of the area had plans to develop a resort in this area but feared that the sight of the condors would frighten the tourist so he had all the Condors assassinated.

And so John McNeely continues his work as caretaker of this endangered species, correcting the negative myth with a living bird. His caring encompasses management of the largest land trust in Connecticut. Some 70 to 80 Andean Condors live in captivity; the 40 California Condors in captivity are smaller and darker. Interbreeding is not desirable so with careful planning seven Andean Condors were released in California fitted with battery operated transmitters. They were recaptured after a successful period and rereleased in Venezuela.

Condors are naturally tame and most deaths occur from entanglement in high pole wires, from shootings, from drinking in puddles contaminated with anti-freeze, from ingesting a deer riddled with lead bullets; so they have become savvy birds, wary of traps. In Holy Week 1987, in the known foraging range of the last Californian Condor in the wild—some 700 square miles and 1 1/2 hours from Los Angeles—a slain cow was set out as bait.

The California recovery team put the carcass out on Good Friday and the last wild Condor arrived. In awe, John McNeely expressed his respect for the wild bird that gave him mixed feelings by reminding himself that this bird's mate was captured the year before. They continued their teamwork and on Easter Sunday the bird landed and was captured with soft netting and went off to San Diego playing his role in condor recovery.

Condors lay only one egg every two years, these eggs have been incubated, hatched and chicks raised without direct



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human intervention. Mirrors are used so the Condor sees only other condor images. They are fed using condor puppets. These methods have been so successful that there are now 150 Californian Condors—40 of them back in the wild. That's a good survival rate. habitat is the issue now and to that end John McNeely and Veedor have campaigned at Paul Winter concerts and have appeared before congress explaining the crisis ensuing from the loss of habitat and the need or reeducation.

Message communicated, we were out to the fields of the Audubon sanctuary at Wellfleet to see our first condor fly over a bit of Cape Cod meadow. Veedor was set out of a van about 150' away. We were told that he weighed 25-28 lbs. that he knows 30 people but 4 or 5 well and is close to two people—John McNeely and Shannon Kearney, a biology graduate from Wisconsin U. now working in behavioral husbandry of rescue and rehabilitation at the New England Aquarium with puffins and otters.

We were also told that condors are sociable but that they have a competitive drive and test people. John's special friend does not go near Veedor for he would drive her away. We were all told to stay together and not leave camera bags or anything else on the ground. Veedor would see the object as a toy and might approach anyone standing alone. If he became frightened he would fly up on the roof. So we stood clumped together and quiet.

We were well prepared for the facts of the show, but you could never be prepared for the emotion of watching a giant black prehistoric looking bird acting like an oversized songbird. Veedor spread his wings, stumbled into flight towards John as we all gasped, most forgetting to use their cameras. Veedor landed; John motioned him up and Veedor took off. Shannon Kearney took a cardboard box and played the game of gently dominance. Veedor attacked the box, battled it around and when he felt he had won over Shannon, stopped. They allow him to win to give him more higher self-esteem. After all, his environment is quite controlled. Veedor flew a couple more times for us and was finally put back in the van.

We all held and studied the largest primary feathers we had ever experienced. Each takes two years to grow. We observed Veedor in his comfortable cage, his head skin color constantly changing like a squid and observed his radio transmitter bolted to his wing. He could have flown to Provincetown and would have to be tracked. We heard his guttural gurglings and looked into kindly, curious eyes. Veedor liked us. We were still amazed, even the children were quiet and respectful. A condor is a wonderful bit of nature.