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# California condors may soon soar again in state's northwest corner



The Yurok tribe, the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are reviewing a project that would introduce California condors in the North Coast's redwoods as early as next year. **BEN MARGOT** Associated Press

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Tiani Williams has spent hours hiding near the stinking remains of road-killed deer. When the stench attracts a turkey vulture into her wire trap, she throws a flannel sheet over the bird and starts a series of tests aimed at her real goal: Returning the California condor to her Yurok ancestral lands in the state's northwest corner.

Today her objective is within sight. The Yurok tribe, the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have launched a formal review of a [project](#) that could see America's largest land bird flying over the North Coast's redwoods as early as next year.

It's a gamble whose success, ironically, depends on hunters.

*Gymnogyps californianus* was tottering on the brink of extinction in the 1980s, when the population of the entire species was reduced to a mere 22 individuals. Today, thanks to a \$5 million-a-year [federal recovery program](#), condor numbers have climbed to more than 400, over half of them foraging in the wilds of Central and Southern California, Arizona, Utah and Baja, Mexico.

In their uphill battle for survival condors have struggled against habitat loss and eggshell thinning, but it is lead poisoning that poses the biggest continuing threat. Among the birds already in the wild, nine out of 10 have elevated lead levels. The primary source, [scientists](#) agree, is fragments of lead ammunition in the carrion they ingest. Unless their exposure to lead is reduced, condors are unlikely to achieve self-sufficiency.

That's why Williams, a Yurok wildlife biologist, has spent so much time in the company of odiferous deer. Since 2003 she and other scientists have been testing the lead levels in vultures and ravens to determine how safe California's northwest region will be for condors.

They found lead. And they found that lead levels spike in the fall, when the forested mountains east of Redwood National Park are rife with hunters. Lead is less prevalent here than in condor country farther south, where the human population is far larger and hunters more numerous. Still, it remains an issue, said Chris West, the Yurok's senior wildlife biologist.

To minimize exposure before any birds are released, condor advocates are reaching out to hunters in an [education program](#) that emphasizes the effects of lead ammunition on condors and wildlife generally, and has given away non-lead ammunition. Hunters are the solution, not the problem, condor advocates say.

It's an odd paradox: To save the species, the condor recovery program is appealing to the very community that has put condors at risk.

It faces fierce opposition from the [NRA](#), which has used a series of far-fetched screeds to denounce the scientific studies linking condor poisoning to lead ammunition, and to squabble over 2013 state legislation banning lead ammunition, due to expand from Southern California's condor country and state-owned lands to all of California in 2019.

It's a mean-spirited fight. At a time when children in Flint, Mich., are suffering from lead in their drinking water, why would anyone advocate deliberate lead contamination of the environment?

Switching to non-lead ammunition is controversial among Yurok hunters, too, but Williams says they understand the larger commitment: making the environment safe for the bird that is central to their creation stories.

Expanding the range of a species to a region where it has not been seen for more than a century represents more than condor recovery. The effort parallels the rejuvenation of the Yurok tribe and its ceremonies, many involving the bird that is larger and flies higher than any other in the region. “We too came to near the edge of losing our way of life after colonialism,” Williams said.

For hunters, this is an opportunity to contribute to a recovery process that transcends the California condor.