

THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR IN SOUTHERN BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

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California Condors *Gymnogyps californianus* in Mexico have been recorded in northern Baja California, mostly in the Sierra San Pedro Martir, as far south as latitude 30 degrees N, between 1879 and 1937 (Anthony 1893; Nelson 1911; Grinnell 1928; Hill and Wiggins 1948; Wilbur and Kiff 1980). In 2001, in Baja Sur, Alex Sim visited a cave that has a life sized probable condor painted on the inside (Figure 1). The cave is located in the Sierra de San Francisco, at 27.32 degrees N, 113.00 degrees W, near the village of Sauzalito, south of the town of San Francisco, which is north of San Ignacio, the main town in the region. The location is 400 km south of the southern-most records of condors in northern Baja. A government permit and guide are needed to visit the cave. The portrait in the cave resembles a California Condor. The bird is painted in black paint, wings outstretched, with a 10 foot wingspan, and with a body form different from eagles and vultures also depicted in cave paintings of the region.

The thousands of cave paintings in this region, which differ from but rival Lascaux, had not been seen or explored by outsiders or anthropologists until fairly recently (Crosby 1997; Rose 1998). Estimates of the age of these paintings are imprecise and variable, ranging from 4500-500 BP (Meighan 1966; Crosby 1997; E Ritter, Archaeologist, Bureau of Land Management, pers. comm. July 17 2008). The locations of the photo in Figure 1 and other bird paintings of possible condors illustrated in Crosby (e.g., pp 70, 80) represent a southward extension of the species' known range. Condors from Baja California Norte could have wandered south themselves. The evidence is circumstantial, however; there is no proof that the paintings are of condors from this particular locale. Native knowledge of the probable condors they painted in these caves may have been imported as a result of trade or travel 400 km to the north, though this seems unlikely. The possible former occurrence of condors in southern Baja implies a range contraction between the time of the paintings and the recent observations only in northern Baja. Condors in southern Baja California may have foraged along the coast on marine mammals, including pinnipeds and cetaceans (which appear in Crosby's photographs of the pictographs), as well as inland on deer *Odocoileus hemionus*, bighorn sheep *Ovis canadensis*, and other mammals.

Documenting native oral history relating to the local presence of condors is impossible because the native human population which predated the arrival of the Jesuits, is completely extinct; the "origins, purpose, and demise of Baja's magnificent paintings remain unknown" (Rose 1998). Radio-carbon dating of the paint and examination of possible changes of climate and habitat over the last several thousand years in Baja California, may shed light on the possibility of a wider condor distribution in Mexico and the foraging niche they occupied.

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Figure 1. Photograph of a life-size painting in black paint of a probable condor with outstretched wings, in the Sierra de San Francisco, Baja California Sur, Mexico. About 1/3 of the wing on the left is out of the picture. Photo by Alex Sim.

