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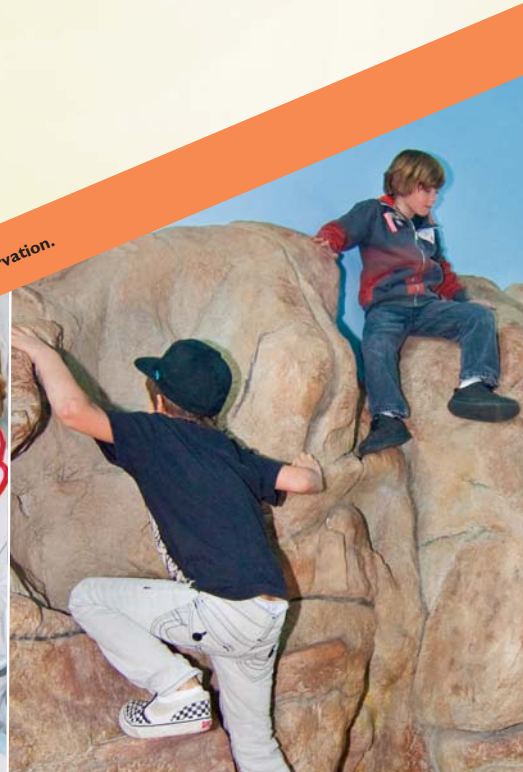
▲▲▲ No species better represents the L.A. Zoo's commitment to conservation than the California condor.

▲▲ / ▲ The California Condor Recovery Zone shines the spotlight on a species few zoo visitors have ever seen.

IN THE ZONE

Through play and hands-on exploration, kids in the California Condor Rescue Zone discover the California condor—and the L.A. Zoo's important role in the species' remarkable recovery.

▼▼▼ Role-playing today could set the stage for future careers in conservation.





The Zoo's new California Condor Rescue Zone (CCRZ), funded by the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association, allows children to experience what it's like to be the largest flying bird in North America. Or they can assume the role of a field biologist, climbing a rock wall while searching for a remote nesting site. In the veterinary lab they can operate on plush condor chicks, all while learning about the threats these birds face in the wild.

Play facilitators are always on hand, offering information and encouragement but not telling the children how to experience the room.

"It's not a traditional education program where an adult is standing there giving information about an animal," says Director of Education Kirsten Perez. "Kids come into the space and create their own learning experience. It's designed to foster a caring for and understanding of California condors—all done through play." Play-based learning leaves

long-lasting impressions on children, allowing them to create a more personal learning experience than they might through a textbook or lecture. Youngsters scaling rock walls can imagine they are biologists hiking to a remote nesting site, while nearby, a game of seek and find cleverly delivers a lesson about what items are beneficial for a parent bird to bring back to a hungry chick. Overhead, life-size condor figures cast shadows on the floor, allowing kids to compare their arm span to the condor's wingspan. These tangible experiences become part of the unique story each child takes away from the CCRZ.

Located in the Bank of America Foundation's Children's Discovery Room just inside the Zoo's entrance, the CCRZ

shines a spotlight on a species few Zoo visitors have been fortunate enough to see. The L.A. Zoo's California condors, many of which are destined for re-release into the wild, are cared for behind-the-scenes, as it is important for the species' survival to minimize their exposure to people.

"I think because we do not have the birds on display here, a lot of people do not know that the Zoo has a huge involvement in the recovery program," says Perez. "But just about every condor that is out in the wild has been through here

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Costumes, props, and a wide range of available activities allow kids to customize their own experience.



California Condor Rescue Zone
conservation
population

at some point.” Since 1982, the Los Angeles Zoo’s role has been to propagate condors for release into the wild and to assist with those releases. The Zoo also provides veterinary support for the entire wild flock in this region.

From an all-time low of 22 in 1985, the California condor population has climbed to more than 350 birds. By December 2008, the number of wild California condors exceeded the number in captivity—a major milestone in the recovery of this critically endangered species.

▼ A father coaches his child through a condor “surgery,” while both learn about threats to the species’ survival.



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In addition to bringing the California condor some much-deserved attention, the CCRZ enables children to have an unfettered, hands-on learning experience through play. In the CCRZ, they become participants rather than observers. As soon as they step through the doorway, they leave behind the ordinary world and enter the exhilarating realm of the California condor.

Upon entering the room, kids literally feel the change in the air. Fans propel air currents upwards, simulating the sensation that the children are gliding on thermals into the room, just as a California condor would. They then have an option to experience the room as a condor or a field biologist and choose costumes and accessories that enhance the experience.

Throughout the space, they explore different representations of California condor habitat. Kids navigate the CCRZ whichever way they choose—some head straight for the rock-climbing wall, while others sit in giant hollowed-out eggs, and still more pretend to scavenge on the

large, fabricated whale carcass. The Nesting Area, sponsored by Farmers Insurance Group, is an area of giant caves and crevices where “condor” kids can make their nests, attempt to successfully hatch eggs and raise chicks.

Designed by MIG, a firm specializing in children’s environments and programs, and fabricated by Lexington, a local company based in Los Angeles, the first part of the CCRZ is designed to simulate the condor’s natural habitat. To achieve this goal, the design team consulted with condor keepers and field biologists, incorporating their feedback into every nook and cranny of the space.

In the next part of the CCRZ, the focus turns to the Zoo’s on-site participation in the California Condor Recovery Program. Outfitted with veterinary tables and equipment, egg incubators and chick-rearing enclosures, the Condor Care Zone—sponsored by the George Hoag Family Foundation—enables young people to try on the role of the Zoo’s veterinarians by performing surgeries and removing microtrash from juvenile birds. They can also “candle” realistic eggs to check on their development.

In the L.A. Zoo Condor Keeper workstation, touch screen computers allow curious kids the opportunity to discover fun facts about condors and watch footage of biologists releasing birds into the wild. This program (produced by Harvest Moon Studio in Los Feliz) allows kids to click through a vast collection of condor clips and info bytes. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the program is that it offers live streaming video from the Zoo’s off-exhibit condor facility, giving guests the unprecedented opportunity to view the Zoo’s resident California condors in real time. Kids can move a joystick to control the camera as it pans through the enclosure.

Perez says, “By being a condor, being a field biologist, being a veterinarian, and being able to role play whatever they choose—and role play freely without being told what to do or how to do it, we hope kids will gain a greater appreciation for condors and want to help protect them in the future.”

◀ Perhaps inspired by the life-size condor replica above him, a boy lets his imagination take flight.



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California Condor Rescue Zone

conservation

Total Number of Condors ?

population

Conservation Close to Home

Conservation has always been a top priority at the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens, and no species better represents the Zoo's long-standing commitment to conservation than the California condor. The Zoo has been a partner in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's California Condor Recovery Program since the 1980s and is home to Topa-Topa, a founding father of the captive-breeding program. Perhaps his species' most famous representative, the 43-year-old male has fathered more than 20 chicks and has been featured in the pages of *Time* magazine.

Naturally, Perez says, when selecting a theme for the Zoo's new Children's Discovery Center, the California condor was the best choice.

California condors have been part of our state's landscape for millions of years. Previously feeding on prehistoric animals such as giant ground sloths, saber-toothed cats, and woolly mammoth, condors have managed to evolve over the millennia, outliving their extinct food sources. But as human population has increased, the condor has become more and more threatened, especially by lead poisoning from spent ammunition.

The slow reproductive cycle of the California condor has posed an enormous challenge in the recovery of the species. Researchers have found that when they removed an egg from a nest, parent birds may soon lay a replacement. Acting on this knowledge, biologists have increased egg production and sped up population growth for the species by removing first eggs to be artificially incubated, and allowing parent birds to hatch second eggs.

In order to instill wariness of humans within the captive-hatched birds, keepers employ a hands-off approach; a lifelike condor puppet serves as a surrogate parent to the chick. Before the chicks

even fledge, they observe and are introduced to adult birds who act as mentors.

Both wild and captive chicks are carefully monitored by field biologists and veterinarians throughout their development. For wild birds, major threats include lead poisoning and the consumption of microtrash. Condors are scavengers who often feed on the remains of hunter-shot carcasses. When lead ammunition is used, the condors ingest lead—with potentially fatal results. One effort to reduce lead poisoning in condors is the Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act, enacted in July 2008, which prohibits the use of lead ammunition in condor range for hunting large game.

Microtrash (bits of debris such as glass, metal, and plastic) is another ongoing problem. It is hypothesized that some condor parents feed microtrash to their young mistaking it for calcium-rich bone fragments. Nearly every year, sick birds are brought in to Zoo requiring surgical removal of microtrash.

The population of California condors has increased more than tenfold since its lowest point. This progress was not achieved easily; every step along the road to recovery has involved the collaborative efforts of multiple individuals and organizations.

The future of this majestic bird is not yet secure. "We still have a long way to go to ensure the survival of this magnificent animal," says Curator of Birds Susie Kasielke. "We continue to test each bird twice a year for lead poisoning and provision the wild population with clean food. We continue to seek effective solutions to the problem of microtrash."

Education is key to conservation. If people have the opportunity to connect on an emotional level with endangered species, they may be inspired

► The Zoo is a long-time partner in the California Condor Recovery Program, whose primary focus is the captive breeding and reintroduction of California condors to the wild.



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to take action to preserve them and their habitats.

The children who today don condor wings and take imaginary flight across the valley of the California Condor Rescue Zone may, in the not-too-distant future, pull on a field biologist's climbing gear, a zookeeper's uniform, or a veterinarian's lab coat, to assist in real-life California condor recovery.

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▼ Actual condor X-rays illuminate the microtrash problem.



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