Bringing Back Prey-Go-Neesh, The California Condor, To My Tribe's Homeland

This spring, California Condors will soar in the sky above Yurok tribal lands in Northern California for the first time in more than a century.

By Tiana Williams-Claussen

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5 Comments

Juvenile California Condors in preparation for a historic release on Yurok tribal lands in spring 2022. *Photo by Matt Mais/Yurok Tribe.*

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I'd like to share a story of near destruction, survival, perseverance, and ultimately healing and restoration. This is my story; a story of my people, the Yurok Tribe; the story of the California Condor—and how we intertwine.

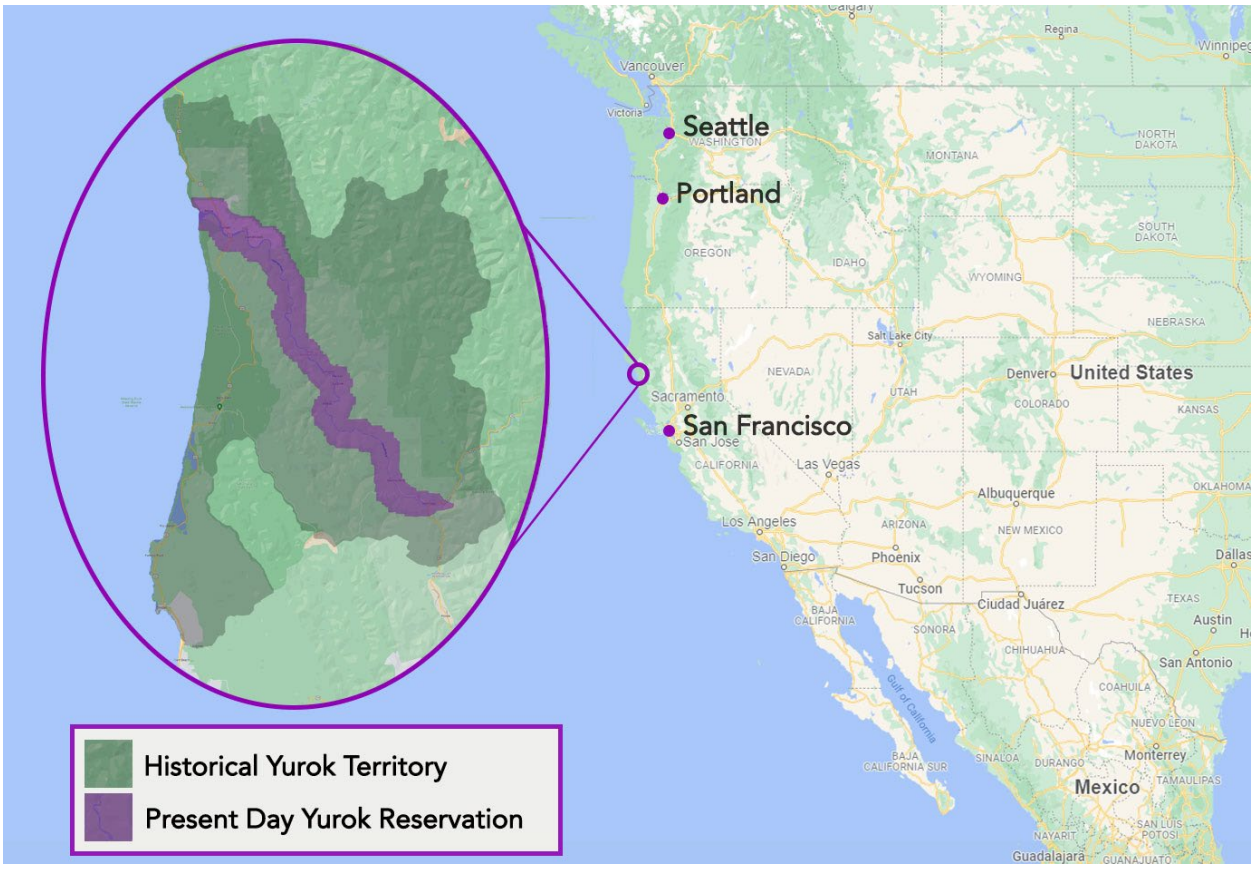
As Yurok people, our foundational reason for being is *"hlkelonah 'ue-mey-ge-tohl-kwoh,"* which means we care for the whole world and strive to keep it healthy and well. We care for not only humans and other living beings, but for the earth itself, its soil, air, and waters, and the spirit that imbues them. In turn, the world cares for us, in balance.

Yurok tribal wildlife biologist Tiana Williams-Claussen is leading the effort to reintroduce California Condors to her people's ancestral lands. *Photo by Matt Mais/Yurok Tribe.*

Since long before non-indigenous exploration and settlement in our area, the Yurok people have lived in the northwest corner of what is now California, with villages stretching along the lower portion of the Klamath River and extending along the Pacific coastline to the north and south. Yurok lands were once home to a trackless expanse of old-growth redwoods, pristine rivers passing through mountainous terrain, and extensive prairie systems maintained through traditional fire. Our world supported an incredible diversity of species, including immeasurable salmon runs; abundant elk, deer, mountain lion, and bear populations; and the magnificent *Prey-go-neesh* (California Condor).

Tragically, our world was almost torn apart post-American contact. The California Gold Rush ignited a wildfire of greed that nearly consumed our home. A surge of new people arrived, overharvesting wildlife for food and profit, razing old-growth redwoods, scarring the land, diverting and draining the water, and laying waste to the carefully balanced ecosystem of which we were a part. Some of the largest massacres in American history occurred locally, and stories told of the atrocities committed against tribal people, including children, reverberate throughout and impact our community still today.

One casualty of the upheaval was the *Prey-go-neesh*—the largest land-based bird in North America, majestic with a wingspan of more than nine feet. The last documented condor in our region was killed at the turn of the 20th century. *Prey-go-neesh* is of deep cultural importance to many tribes throughout California and the Pacific Northwest. For the Yurok, this is due to his relationship with world renewal and our reason for being. Many families, my own included, taught that the condor was a sacred creature, not to be harmed. *Prey-go-neesh* was amongst the first spirits of the world, and helped teach us how to establish and maintain balance, and to live in a good way. Considered a kind-hearted spirit, and one of renewal, he helped establish our world-renewal ceremonies, providing a song and a prayer that we continue to sing today, and carrying our prayers to the heavens when asking for the world to be in balance. Any condor feathers that we received, which we use in our regalia and which carry the spirit of *Prey-go-neesh*, were considered gifts. The loss of *Prey-go-neesh* was devastating.



The present-day Yurok reservation (purple) flanks the Klamath River and is a fraction the size of historical Yurok lands

(dark green, approximate). *Boundaries drawn from Ramos. (2022). Understanding Yurok traditional ecological knowledge and wildlife management. Journal of Wildlife Management.*

California Condors likewise disappeared from most of western North America in the 20th century. Prehistorically they ranged from British Columbia to northern Mexico. By the 1950s, their range had contracted to a small wishbone-shaped area in central and southern California. California Condor was among the first animals listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. By the 1980s there were only 22 condors left in the entire world, and the last wild, free-flying condors were captured for their own protection. In a valiant effort to save the species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service led a coalition of conservation partners in starting a controversial but successful captive-breeding program. Since the early 1990s, this coalition has been reintroducing condors into the wild at three release areas in California and one near the Grand Canyon in Arizona. There is another release site in Baja California, managed in coordination with the Mexican government.

In 2003, the Yurok Tribal Park Taskforce—a panel of elders and knowledgeable tribal members formed to prioritize the natural and cultural restoration needs of our tribe's people and land—chose *Prey-go-neesh* as the single most important land-based species to restore. At the time, I had just graduated from high school, unsure of what I wanted to do with my life. I had no idea that I would be part of bringing *Prey-go-neesh* back home to the Yurok ancestral territory.

MPSharwood/Wikimedia

Growing up, I was blessed to live what I recognize now as a very privileged life, spending summers fishing near my ancestral village of Wehl-kwew at the mouth of the Klamath River,

hiking amongst the ancient redwoods, experiencing and contributing to our local ceremonies, growing strong and healthy in my human and ecological community. Though my life's path was unclear, I recognized that being Yurok was foundational to who I was and who I wanted to be—and my goal was to equip myself to serve my community.

I loved science and pursued a bachelor's degree in biochemical sciences at Harvard University. Upon graduation in 2007, I was provided an opportunity to return home through an internship program managed by the Yurok Tribe's Education Department, and offered a position with our Office of Self-Governance—which is like the State Department for tribes to promote co-management throughout our ancestral lands. Today's Yurok Reservation is only 10% of our ancestral territory, but we retain our traditional relationship with and responsibility to the whole of our ancestral lands.

In 2008, the Yurok Tribe received a USFWS Tribal Wildlife Grant to begin a feasibility analysis of bringing *Prey-go-neesh* home. I and wildlife biologist Chris West were hired as the first employees of the newly formed Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department, with the California Condor as its flagship species. Around this time, we approached our local neighbors and land managers, the Redwood National and State Parks, with an invitation for partnership, which was enthusiastically accepted.

We started by studying our area's habitat suitability for condors—assessing the potential risk from lead contamination and organochlorine pesticides, the two major contributing factors to condor declines. Lead poisoning of condors and other scavenging raptors primarily occurs due to the use of lead ammunition, which fragments heavily upon impact and can be left behind in the gut piles of deer and game harvested by hunters [see Soaring in Circles, Summer 2017]. Lead resulted in 50% of known wild condor mortalities in 2020. DDT is the organochlorine pesticide that continues to cause eggshell thinning and nest failure in condors. Even though it was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1970s, DDT persists in the environment today and still bioaccumulates in the fatty tissues of long-lived animals. For our habitat analysis, we used blood samples of other scavenging birds in our area (Turkey Vultures and ravens) to measure the risk to condors from lead, and we likewise used blubber samples of deceased sea lions and other blubbery marine mammals that washed up on shore to assess risk levels from DDT.

It turns out that my tribal lands support an ecosystem with ample high-quality condor habitat. We identified a strong potential release site within the Yurok ancestral territory and Redwood National Park boundaries. Within this area, sea lions had 4-fold lower levels of DDT contamination than sea lions in central California, near the only other coastal condor release site. Lead levels in our area were still concerning; almost a quarter of Turkey Vultures in our analysis had elevated lead levels in their blood, and a complementary study on ravens gave clear indication that lead contamination in these birds correlated with the hunting season. But we had a plan for mitigating that lead risk. Recognizing the inherent conservation ethic of many hunters, we developed the Hunters as Stewards program to reach out and engage hunters as powerful partners for condors. We listened thoughtfully to hunter concerns and responded to them. Based on post-outreach surveys, as many as 95% of hunters engaged in our program indicated they would voluntarily make the switch to non-lead ammunition.

In 2016 our feasibility analysis culminated in a Memorandum of Understanding with 16 signatories—including local nonprofit conservation groups, regional zoos, utility and timber companies, state and federal government agencies, and the Yurok Tribe—all recognizing that returning condors to northern California would benefit the species, the region, and the people who live here.

In April 2022, we will start reintroducing condors to Yurok ancestral territory, nearly two decades after the initial decision to bring *Prey-go-neesh* home. (Update: the first two condors were released on May 3, 2022.) The California Condor Recovery Program has chosen and allocated four birds—juvenile condors from breeding facilities at the Oregon Zoo and Boise Center for Birds of Prey that are fully flight-capable, but have never been free-flying in the wild. These birds transferred to our flight facility in late March, 2022, and will spend at least a month in an outdoor pen, acclimatizing to our region. During this period they'll get used to our environmental conditions and establish the release site as central to their new home range. By May 2022, they will be released to fly free.

And then for the next 20 years, the Yurok Tribe and Redwood National Park plan to release an additional six condors every year. Each bird will be monitored daily, with satellite- and radio-transmitters and with visual identification via wing tags. The condors will be trapped at least twice every year to assess potential lead contamination or other health or behavioral issues, and to maintain the monitoring equipment. We are currently partnering with our local Sequoia Park Zoo to build a Condor Care Center for nearby triage and treatment, as well as coordinating with a variety of veterinary facilities along the West Coast to provide care for these treasured condors throughout their ranges. As our condor program manager Chris West often says, "it takes a village to raise a condor"—and we are grateful beyond words for all the support we have and will continue to receive.

It's been quite the journey. Over the last 14 years I've gotten married, had a child, and sprouted significantly more gray hair. Our two-person team has grown; I'm now director of an expanded tribal wildlife department with 16 crew members who support a variety of tribal restoration needs. We've also lost many of the elders who first started us on this journey. Every time my heart breaks a little bit harder. Every time it heals again stronger, despite—or perhaps because of—the scars left behind. I know that I am helping fulfill their prayers.

The hope and excitement throughout our community, including that of my 3-year-old daughter who loves her "Go-neesh," give me strength. She's going to be part of the first generation of Yurok children in over a century who grow up with condors in their sky.

I think of all these things, and all the work and prayers started long before I was even born, and I know that this was always meant to be my path, our story.

Tiana Williams-Claussen is director of the Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department, which works for the stewardship of all natural resources within Yurok ancestral territory in Northern California.

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