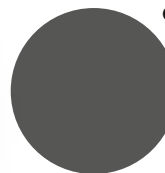


Tales *FROM THE BUSH*

California condors will scavenge on large carcasses



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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I scanned all the obvious roosting and potential nesting sites – Lion Canyon is honeycombed with alcoves, grottoes and clefts – but by day three I still wasn't having any luck. Losing hope, in the late afternoon I dropped my camera pack and stretched out on a broad sandstone plateau, closing my eyes, head resting on my pack. Puffy cumulus nimbus drifted above and I momentarily dozed off.

It felt as if the clouds were getting closer and blocking out the sun. Then there was a monumental swoosh directly above me, as if a hang-glider had soared overhead. I opened my eyes and sat up, slightly alarmed by such a profound sensation. Looking around I saw nothing, but then a solitary California condor circled back, soaring directly above me, its impressive, almost 3m wingspan casting a prominent shadow on the sandstone.

Condors are inquisitive birds, and as I lay still, out in the open, perhaps this condor had mistaken me for a potential meal. As soon as I sat up, the condor flew off and landed on a nearby pinnacle, its pumpkin-coloured head standing out against the rugged wilderness.

The lone condor roosted in solace, enjoying the semi-arid backcountry forest. I managed to fire off a few frames, its black velvety feathers shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight. Then shadows crept across the sandstone again. Overhead, three more condors soared westward. Social birds, the lone condor I photographed flew off to join the others.

My first encounter was more than I had hoped for – a wilderness high that continues to soar like a California condor. **W**

Have a wild tale to tell? Email a brief synopsis to catherine.smalley@ourmedia.co.uk

Cumulus confusion

It pays to keep your eyes on the skies in the Californian wilds

LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST, CALIFORNIA

“THE SKIES WERE PARTLY CLOUDY, the air cool and crisp as winter morphed into spring. While scaling the gritty sandstone crags of Lion Canyon in the Los Padres National Forest, I searched for California condors, a Pleistocene remnant and a species on the brink of extinction.

It was 1996 and the US Fish and Wildlife Service was releasing captive-bred condors into their historic habitat. Early on, Lion Canyon was a vital release site. Its remote, backcountry wilds were ideal for re-establishing populations. I was in the throes of a five-day backpacking trip, hoping to get my first photograph of these raptors.

CHUCK GRAHAM

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