

THE ANDEAN CONDOR

Carol Mitchell (member 685)



On the afternoon of 27th December 1831 a twenty two year old graduate from Christ's College, Cambridge sailed from Devonport as the resident naturalist on *HMS Beagle*. This very small, ten-gun brig, just 242 tons and only 90 feet long, had been appointed by the Admiralty to chart the South American coast and to accomplish a more accurate fixing of longitude.

Guyana (1996) S.G. 4731

The man's observations over the next five years would change the world forever but his initial experiences were far from comfortable. However, he was young and determined not to fail his captain. So he overcame his severe sea-sickness and, after some six months into the voyage, began to undertake his duties fully whenever and wherever the ship docked. Between the 14th August and 27th September 1834 whilst the ship was in Valparaiso, Charles Darwin made his excursion into the Andes. As he travelled he became one of the first Europeans to observe and document the wildlife and, in particular, the Andean Condor. His astonishment at their flying ability is obvious from his journal entry. 'Except when rising from the ground, I do not recall having seen one of the birds flap their wings'. He recorded the way in which these 'fierce birds' attacked the young lambs and goats and how the shepherds had trained their dogs to run at the birds barking for as long and loudly as possible.

Vietnam (1985) S.G. 842

One bird shot by Darwin himself had a wingspan of more than eight feet. However, there were two main methods used by the unarmed locals of trapping the condors. The first was to place an animal carcass within the bounds of a fenced enclosure with a narrow exit, await the arrival of a bird, close that exit and, since the Condor has to make a running take-off along the ground, it could not get away. The second method was to wait until the birds roosted at night when one man would climb the tree and throw a noose around the neck to pull it down. Whilst this sounds at least difficult, if not bizarre, Condors are recorded as very heavy sleepers. The fruits of the men's labours netted them the then princely sum of 50p per bird!



Unsurprisingly, the majority of stamps depicting the Andean Condor (*Vultur gryphus*) originate from South American countries with Ecuador leading the way.



Ecuador (1937) S.G. 560

The Condor is the official national bird of Ecuador and a key feature of the country's coat of arms where it is shown perched above Mount Chimborazo, the country's highest peak, with its wings outstretched symbolising courage and strength. This coat of arms has been the central feature of the national flag since 1860. Following a campaign by both national and international bird conservation organisations, in 1991 the Ecuadorian National Congress declared July 7th each year to be National Condor Day. One of the major haunts of the Condor is the vast and aptly named Condor



Colombia (1987) S.G. 1785

Bolivia (1995) S.G. 1354

Bio-reserve, a 5.4 million acre protected area east of Quito. The reserve features everything from snow-capped mountains and high altitude grasslands to rivers and rainforests.



Not surprisingly, the bird is found well away from people among the peaks and valleys of the High Andes and is recorded of soaring at over 18000ft.



Bolivia (1921) S.G. 221



Grenada Grenadines (2000) S.G. 3155



Guyana (1990) S.G. 3028

Early stamps compared the flight of the Condor with those of aeroplanes and even a zeppelin.

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Chile (1931) S.G. 225 Argentina (1951) S.G. 827

The Andean Condor is native to and breeds in eight South American countries, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. However, given the vast geographical areas, the United Nation estimate is that only 10,000 of mature individuals exist in the entire continent and it is believed that there are only around 50 wild Condors left in Ecuador itself. This makes it a Critically Endangered species caused by persecution, lack of food and poisoning and, therefore, stamps highlighting this status are issued to raise awareness of conservation concerns.



Bolivia (1987) S.G. 1133



Ecuador (1996) S.G. 2275



Grenada (1995) S.G. 2861, 2862 and 2863

The breeding pattern of the Condor does not help increase the number of birds. A single egg is laid every other year on a cliff edge or in a small cave. The chick is nurtured by its parents for up to two years and takes five to eight years to reach maturity. When it is fully grown, it is the world's biggest raptor and South America's largest flying bird.



Cuba (1995) S.G. MS 3109

Adults of both sexes have a bare head, predominately black plumage and a conspicuous white ruff. The yellow-eyed males are endowed with a large comb and neck wattle. The females lack the comb and wattle and have red eyes.



Tanzania (1994) S.G. 1850



Lesotho (1998) S.G. 1358 M1

The Condors' diet is mainly carrion and they scavenge on the carcasses of mammals including tapir, deer, rodents and domestic livestock. Their voracious appetite has been documented as being able to tear off and consume 15lb of meat at one sitting!



Chile (1976) S.G. 779

However, the northern part of the American continent could not bear to be left out of the Condor stakes so they have their own Condor, the Californian Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*). Interestingly, no South American country has ever issued a stamp illustrating this member of the family!