

Siletz Valley School Dee-Ni Students visit Oregon Zoo Condors

By Kathy Kentta, Healthy Traditions Project Coordinator



Pictured not in order: David Shepherdson Oregon Zoo, Leland Brown Oregon Zoo, Siletz Tribal Elder Shirley Walker, Natural Resources Committee member Heather Walker, Dee-Ni Instructor Joe Scott, Crystal Scott, Anthony Butler, Jonathan Herrmann, William Whitehead, Felisha Howell.

The Healthy Traditions Program organized a field trip for Siletz Valley Early College Academy students to the Condor Breeding Facility at the Oregon Zoo in December.

Stretching 10 feet from wingtip to wingtip, California condors are the largest land birds in North America and once ranged from British Columbia to Baja, California, and inland to the Rocky Mountains.

Historical and scientific evidence suggests they once bred in the Pacific Northwest, yet the California condor has not been documented in Oregon for more than a century.

Condors play a critical role in ecosystems by recycling nutrients and disposing of dead, disease-ridden animals. Known to some indigenous peoples as thunderbirds, they have long been revered by humans but during the first half of the 20th century, they nearly became extinct.

Prior to visiting the Condor Breeding Facility, Healthy Traditions presented in the classroom about the Oregon Zoo Condor Summits, educating the public about the zoo's ongoing captive breeding and release program.

Lead poisoning is the single greatest threat to the survival of condors. When condors and other scavengers feed on the remains of animals shot with lead ammunition, lead can enter their bloodstream, affecting the central nervous system and leading to starvation or predation in their weakened state.

Using lead-free ammunition spares scavengers a slow death and provides a vital seasonal food source (gut piles) for many animals.

Photo by Tim Huntington Photography



My journey to learn more about condors began in 2010 at the Oregon Zoo Condor Summit. I learned about Arizona's successful initiative with the USFWS in the Grand Canyon to reduce use of lead ammunition for hunting. This initiative was necessary after condors had been poisoned after feeding on the gut piles of carcasses left in the field.

Given that hunters care about conservation, they agreed to participate in bagging their gut piles and exchanging them for a free box of non-toxic ammo. As another incentive, hunters who brought in their gut piles also were automatically entered into a drawing for a gift certificate from a retailer such as Cabella's.

In November 2015, the Oregon Zoo hosted its second Condor Summit along with the Oregon Chapter of Wildlife Society. This summit had presenters from the Oregon Chapter of Wildlife Society, Oregon State University, U.S. Geological Survey, Oregon Hunter's Assoc., USFWS and ODFW.

Recent research and findings were presented by experts in the field. Two ammunition companies presented the history of ammunition and improvements in non-toxic ammunition.

A representative from USFWS presented findings from a preliminary report on blood lead levels in golden eagle chick populations in Eastern Oregon. Lead is also one of the leading causes of chick mortality.

Before long, Oregon Tribes should have the chance to see condors in our skies. The Yurok Tribe in Northern California and the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho are waiting to be selected by the USFWS as successful locations to release birds. Both of these Tribes are working hard to partner with government agencies, wildlife organizations and other stakeholders.

It will take a combination of all the stakeholders, including Oregon Tribes and hunters, to utilize the Oregon Zoo's educational information provided through its condor exhibit and outreach coordinator, Leland Brown.

We as individuals have the opportunity to be a leader in ensuring condors can thrive in Oregon. Hunters can do their part to protect condors from lead by burying carcasses and the remains of animals shot with lead ammunition.



Condors Facility Senior Keeper Kelli Walker explains facts regarding the condor and monitoring the condors and their hatchlings.