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VIDEO SERIES: BEST WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES OF 2024

by Espen Helland

Espen Helland reflects on an extraordinary chapter in his life as a professional wildlife photographer - from the rugged mountains of Norway to the sweeping savannahs of the Serengeti, travelling diverse landscapes and capturing unforgettable moments with a wide array of wildlife.



EL CONDOR PASA: A MEETING WITH THE KING OF THE ANDES

by Bruno Wägli

Bruno Wägli shares a once-in-a-lifetime experience - photographing the extraordinary Andean condor; a creature whose cultural significance and precarious survival, beyond its sheer size and majestic flight, make every sighting feel like a privilege.



STARS AND SNAKES - COMBINING ASTROPHOTOGRAPHY WITH SNAKE PHOTOGRAPHY IN CALIFORNIA AND AUSTRALIA

by Nicholas Hess

The stars align for Nicholas Hess as he takes you behind the scenes on two of his favorite and most challenging shots - exposing snakes and stars in a single, well-balanced image.

EL CONDOR PASA: A MEETING WITH THE KING OF THE ANDES

by Bruno Wägli

Who doesn't know Simon & Garfunkel's iconic El Condor Pasa from the 1970s? Inspired by a traditional Peruvian folk tune, its original lyrics—believed to date back to 1913—are far less familiar:

"Oh majestic condor of the Andes, take me home to the Andes, oh condor. I want to return to my beloved land and live with my Inca brothers, that is my deepest wish, oh condor..."

For the Inca, the Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) was far more than a bird—it held immense cultural and spiritual importance. Soaring high above the mountains, it symbolised freedom and power.

Regarded as a sacred messenger connecting the earthly realm with gods and ancestors, the condor played a pivotal role in Incan religious practices.

Its ability to reach great heights made it a potent emblem of the connection between earth and sky.



3.2m of wingspan is impressive - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
430mm, 1/2000 sec, f/8, ISO 3600

At some places they come quite close - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
490mm, 1/2000 sec, f8, ISO 1800



These masterful gliders use thermal updrafts to navigate Andean cliffs effortlessly.

Capable of speeds up to 55 km/h and altitudes of 7,000 meters, condors can travel as far as 250 kilometres in a single day while searching for food.

Rainy weather, however, keeps them grounded.

One of the best places to witness these majestic birds is the Colca Canyon in Peru, about a 4.5-hour drive from Arequipa. At nearly 3,800 meters above sea level, this breathtaking canyon—one of the world's deepest—remains a critical natural habitat for condors.

Sightings, however, are not guaranteed. Wind, weather, and thermals all play a role in whether the condors ascend.

Our guide, Julie, set our expectations low, sharing that she had recently gone six days with a photographer without seeing a single condor. Fellow travelers at our lodge confirmed the uncertainty, reporting no sightings that day but successes earlier in the week.

Determined, we left at 4:00 a.m. to reach the best viewpoint by sunrise. September mornings between 7:00 and 9:00 a.m. offer the highest likelihood of spotting these kings of the Andes.

Patience paid off.

Shortly after arrival, we spotted condors far below, gliding through the canyon. Initial "record shots" showed them as tiny specks, but as the morning advanced, these magnificent creatures soared closer, offering stunning photographic opportunities.



**Well camouflaged and therefore sometimes hard to spot -
Colca Canyon, Peru.**

*Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
430mm, 1/1600 sec, f 7.6, ISO 1250*



Still not grown up yet - Colca Canyon, Peru.

*Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-14x
430mm, 1/1600 sec, f 7.6, ISO 640*

With a wingspan of up to 3.3 meters, the Andean condor ranks among the largest flying birds in the world. Adults are predominantly black with striking white wing patches and a distinctive white neck collar.

Juveniles, by contrast, are greyish-brown, only developing adult plumage at around four or five years old.

Males, larger than females, have a prominent crest on their heads.

Juvenile male condor (note the developing crest) - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
400mm, 1/1600 sec, f 7.6, ISO 800





Male and female differ from each other -
note the lack of carnucle - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
430mm, 1/2000 sec, f 8, ISO 1400

They can reach heights of 7000m - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S
400mm, 1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 125



Their hooked beaks are perfectly adapted for tearing carrion, their primary food source. With their enormous wingspan of over 3 meters, they can circle in the air for hours without flapping their wings.

Their often unexpected flight maneuvers scare the canyon's animals.

The llamas, vicunas and wild donkeys that graze there flee at their sudden appearance and often fall into the abyss where the condors can later feed on them.

When they spot a carrion, they often land nearby to feed.



The condor's range spans the Andean regions of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina.

Living at elevations of 1,000 to 5,000 meters, they thrive in mountain valleys and along steep cliffs, favoring open grasslands for foraging.

However, habitat loss, illegal hunting, and lead poisoning have left the species critically endangered.

As scavengers, condors rely on carcasses, but habitat destruction limits their food supply. Moreover, poisoned bait meant for predators like pumas, often inadvertently kills condors.

A full-grown female condor (note the white collar) - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
560mm, 1/2000 sec, f 8, ISO 1600



A curious juvenile female condor - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-14x
430mm, 1/1600 sec, f 7.6, ISO1000

A female condor with two juvenile males,
probably sons - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
430mm, 1/2000 sec, f 8, ISO 1000



Condors mature slowly, reaching sexual maturity at six or seven years, and typically mate for life. Females lay one or two eggs every two years, often on exposed rocky ledges.

Both parents share incubation duties, with eggs hatching after 55–65 days. Chicks are fed by both parents and remain dependent for up to 18 months.

In the wild, condors live around 40 years, while in captivity, they can reach an astonishing 85 years.



Portrait of a male juvenile condor - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
530mm, 1/1600 sec, f 8, ISO 900

Photographing condors requires both technical skill and patience, a good understanding of the behavior of these majestic birds and, last but not least, a little luck. With the right equipment, preparation and a feeling for the moment, you can take impressive and emotional pictures of one of the most fascinating birds in the world.

Condors often fly at great heights and are very fast. This means that it is best to work with a long lens to capture them in flight. A fast lens (e.g. a 400mm or 600mm telephoto lens) and a camera with powerful autofocus and subject recognition are ideal for photographing the birds in sharp detail.

As with all flight shots of birds, a fast shutter speed is required. Because of the great height, it is a good idea to support the heavy equipment with a monopod.

The natural light changes associated with thermal updrafts as well as the depth of the canyon and therefore can create difficult lighting conditions as the birds fly in both bright and shaded areas of the landscape.

An unforgettable sight - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
410mm, 1/2000 sec, f8, ISO 2000



Condors will mate for life - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S
400mm, 1/2000 sec, f 5.6, ISO 320



A well-chosen background can emphasize the vastness and majesty of the condor. You should try to photograph the bird against a dramatic background such as rugged mountain ranges, clouds or wide valleys.

Make sure the background is not too distracting and try to stage the condor in relation to the landscape to emphasize its size and majesty.

Try to get into a position where the wind favors your location. This may allow you to make better use of the condor for photos as it moves in the direction of your location.



A full-grown condor in his natural habitat - Colca Canyon, Peru.
Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S Z TC-1.4x
330mm, 1/2000 sec, f 8, ISO180

They sail without flapping their wings - Colca Canyon, Peru.

Nikon Z8 + Nikkor Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S
400mm, 1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 560

Encountering the King of the Andes is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Beyond its sheer size and majestic flight, the bird's cultural significance and precarious survival make every sighting feel like a privilege.

For travelers, visiting locations like the Colca Canyon not only offers the chance to witness these extraordinary creatures but also supports conservation efforts to ensure future generations can share the awe of this unforgettable encounter.



About the Photographer

Bruno Wägli

Bruno Wägli, Ph.D in contemporary history, enjoys nothing more than to go on extended photo trips to remote areas. He fell in love with southern Africa and its abundant wildlife: Namibia, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and above all, Zambia are countries he likes to rediscover time and time again. Other favorite places of his include the northern and southern polar regions (Antarctica, Greenland, Spitzbergen), Alaska, and the Yukon. Bruno also keeps chasing new motifs in his home country of Switzerland, where the natural beauty of the Alps and of the many lakes and rivers never cease to excite him.



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