

SCENEMAKER: Protecting the Nest - Local Filmmaker's Condor Documentary Hits the Santa Barbara film festival

By Ted Mills, News-Press Correspondent

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In 1985 there were nine wild California Condors in the state, a legacy of their traditional breeding grounds having turned into the megaspawl of Los Angeles over time. Thanks to the work of a small group of conservationists, that population has now risen to about 200 in the wild, and the same amount in captivity.

Filmmaker Jeff McLoughlin has documented these efforts in his first film, "The Condor's Shadow," a 2 1/2 year effort that gets its premiere this week at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

"This is a third career for me," says Mr. McLoughlin, who worked with local filmmaker and artist Ethan Turpin on the project. A Santa Barbara High school graduate, Mr. McLoughlin had a long career in corporate marketing, producing testimonial corporate films for medical companies. He loved it, but he had been thinking about moving into nature documentaries for some time.

Inspired by a story by Matt Kettmann in the Independent, Mr. McLoughlin was looking for an environmental story to tell that was not all doom and gloom. It seemed a simple enough story to tell, but "the devil was in the details," he says, as he found the rehabilitation of the condor to be a very complex operation.

The birds are still conservation dependent, as the primary challenge to keeping them alive is the amount of lead shot used by hunters. Condors scavenge anything, and often swallow the leftover pellets. And even though lead is outlawed in California, it still occurs.

"It's a bird that can't really fly free," Mr. McLoughlin says.

But, he adds, hunters aren't the enemy in this story. Money from hunting licenses go towards conservation, for example, and one earlier PSA project Mr. McLoughlin worked on was an outreach video to hunters raising awareness over lead.

The film follows one particular pair of condors over a year. With the use of helmet-cams, we even follow one of the biologists down a cliff face so he can check on the nest, and put a radio transmitter on a chick. (All condors have transmitters now.)

Joseph Brandt, lead field biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's condor program, is the "hero" of the film, but the program also uses a lot of volunteers. There's a remarkable scene where a captive egg is put back into a wild nest, showing the extreme lengths undertaken by conservationists to keep the cycle of life going.

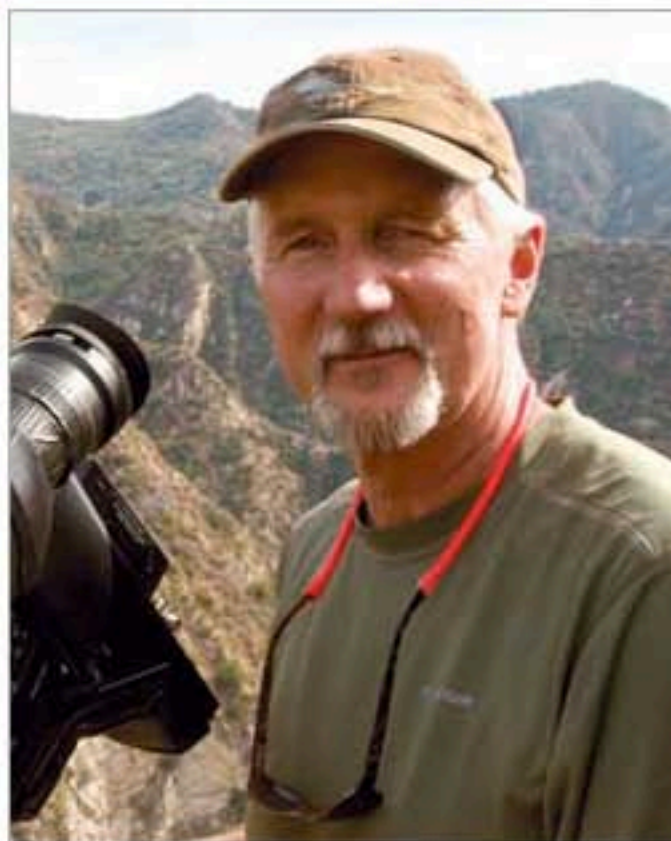
Mr. Turpin, he says, was an invaluable collaborator, hanging off cliffs to get shots.

"They're very curious birds," Mr. McLoughlin says of the condor. "They would land about 20 feet away from you and check you out. It's quite a spiritual experience, feeling this bird swooping over your head. They have a ten-foot wingspan . . . and you can hear the wind rushing through their primary feathers before you see them."

"This was a longtime aspiration to get this premiered in Santa Barbara," Mr. McLoughlin says. "There's such a huge community here that has been involved in the program over the years. There's a woman at the Natural History Museum, Janet Hamber, who is 82 and still volunteering to track these birds."

"This was a dream project for me and it's worked out really well," he says.

"The Condor's Shadow" will be shown 1:20 p.m. at Metro 4 and 10 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 2 at the Museum of Art.



FROM TOP :
Filmmaker Jeff McLoughlin

A still from the film "The Condor's Shadow"

Filming "The Condor's Shadow"

Good Eye Films photo