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CONDOR EXHIBIT TAKES OFF IN P.G.

History museum to house life-size models of endangered birds

By ELISABETH NADIN
 Herald Correspondent

Few people will ever have the chance to spy on a nesting condor and her mate in the wild. A life-size replica may have to suffice.

The Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History has welcomed some new members to its exhibit family: a soaring Fiberglas condor with a 10-foot wingspan and his mate, tending their egg in a cave.

The life-size condor models are the stars of an exhibit opening March 29. Along with the birds, interactive condor displays and information on condor conservation efforts will show visitors what it's like to work with an endangered species.

"There really has never been an exhibit like this before," said Sheila Foster, spokeswoman for the Ventana Wilderness Society. "It's the first of its kind that really looks at the history of the condor recovery program."

The Ventana Wilderness Society, founded in 1977, has been releasing condors raised in captivity since 1997. There are now close to 200 condors, and 22 of the 78 in the wild live in the Big Sur area.

"We wanted to give visitors a sense of what it's like to be a condor ecologist, and why people give their lives to help save an endangered species. And that it's working, we're doing it. And they can do it, too," said Foster.

As part of the display, museum visitors can pretend they are condor conservationists at work, observing condors from the protective shelter of a blind. This is a roomy camouflage-covered shelter in which researchers watch the birds. It prevents human impact on the condors' wild nature. In the museum version, a window in the blind looks out on a seated condor, and a telescope focuses on condor habitat.

In another part of the exhibit, children can sit in a comfy armchair, sheltered by the wings of a condor mentor who preps them for life in the wild. A grandmotherly voice coos soft warnings to growing chicks. The armchair condor is dedicated to the memory of Adult Condor 8, who was shot by a poacher in Kern County two weeks ago. AC8 was the oldest condor in the wild; she was one of the original nine birds captured during conservation efforts in the late 1980s. This matriarch mothered 12 offspring in captivity and was released in April 2000.

While condor couples usually raise one chick every two years in the wild, the mentor lives with six or seven chicks in captivity, teaching them how to behave.

"We wanted to make this exhibit as interactive as possible, to give children and adults a sense of what's involved in letting the condors go, and so they can feel more connected to the condors," said Foster.

In the center of the museum display, patrons can walk through a spiraling panoramic photo wall of the Big Sur condor habitat. While listening to condor sounds from an overhead dome, visitors can sense how much space a condor needs to live in.

The rest of the exhibit room will include condor facts, history of the bird's flight to endangerment, information on the captive breeding program and plans for the future.

"I couldn't be happier about what's happening to the condors," said museum director Stephen Bailey. "It's not easy to re-establish a species like this, and it's a story that needs to be told."

Exhibit installation began Monday, watched over by many of the volunteers who made the display possible. Condor model sculptors James "Bud" Bottoms and Sanford Decker of North Hollywood-based Decker Studios helped hang the soaring bird.

"It's a great tribute to those human beings who have acted positively to bring something back that was almost gone," said Bottoms, who designed and cast the lifelike birds. Bottoms and Decker have been donating their work to the Ventana Wilderness Society's venture to save the condor since 1995.

"I wanted to see what we could do together, as artists, to facilitate saving an endangered species," said Decker. "You can't save the world, but you can go after one species."

Decker and Bottoms volunteered their time and facilities, estimated at \$23,000, for the project. Materials, valued at \$22,000, were paid for by the museum association.

Joan Hadden of TerraFocus, a Los Altos environmental outreach organization and one of the display coordinators, estimates donated materials for the exhibit topped \$150,000.

"And that's not including volunteer work," she said. "There's been a tremendous upsurge of volunteers -- professional services -- to get this project done." TerraFocus created the Condor Cam, a condor surveillance system whose live footage of birds in the wild will eventually be accessible on the Internet.

The condor exhibit opens at 7 p.m. March 29 to the tunes of a Brazilian samba band.

"They will be dressed in feathers, and we encourage anyone who wants to dress in feathers," said Foster, the Ventana Wilderness Society spokeswoman.

The condor models will become part of permanent museum display after the temporary, interactive exhibit closes Aug. 31. Foster hopes the temporary display will then travel to area zoos.

On the Net:

www.pgmuseum.org

If you go • What: Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History condor exhibit • When: opens 7 p.m. March 29. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free. • Where: at Forest

and Central avenues

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