

## The Man in Black & The Birds in Yellow: Walking the Line of Extinction

By Coley Turner

With the recent release of the Bob Dylan biographical movie “A Complete Unknown”, I wanted to take the time to talk about another character in this film, a great American musician in his own right, the one and only Johnny Cash. I also want to preface this by saying that I am a fan of Johnny Cash, and he is arguably one of the greatest things to come from my home state of Arkansas. However, there is a chapter of his life that most people have probably never heard of.

The Los Padres National Forest was the only place in the world where you could find California Condors in 1965. California Condors are some of the largest birds in the world, and the largest in North America by wingspan. They are so big that they are sometimes mistaken for airplanes as they soar high in the sky.

California Condors resemble gigantic vultures, mostly black aside from some white on their wings and a bald yellow head. They are currently critically endangered, and were at one point extinct in the wild. In 1965, their population had dwindled down to only 53 California Condors left in the entire world. And unfortunately, things were about to get even worse for them, because none other than Johnny Cash was on a fishing trip in the region.

There are conflicting stories about what happened that night, whether it was mechanical failure or user error. Either way, Johnny Cash’s truck caught on fire, leading to a devastating wildfire. This fire burned 508 acres of the Los Padres National Forest, and took out nearly all of the remaining California Condors. Once the smoke had settled, 49 of the last 53 California Condors could not be found.

It is unknown how many of the condors actually perished directly in the fire and how many were displaced to other areas. But, even if most of them simply flew away from the fire, they likely roamed far from the protection that the National Forest provide. This would have greatly increased their chances of perishing from the problems that lead to their population being so low- lead poisoning, ingesting litter, and pesticide exposure.

Cash was fined the equivalent of nearly half a million dollars in today’s money for arson and negligence. He disputed these charges and fought a lengthy court battle before eventually accepting them. These court proceedings led to an exchange now infamous in the history of bird conservation—

“Did you start this fire?”

“No. My truck did, and it's dead, so you can't question it.”

“Do you feel bad about what you did?”

“Well, I feel pretty good right now.”

“But how about driving all those condors out of the refuge?”

“You mean those yellow buzzards.”

“Yes, Mr. Cash, those yellow buzzards.”

“I don't give a [bleep] about your yellow buzzards. Why should I care?”

Cash later retracted those statements, mentioning that he was not proud of his actions during this time. But the exchange is symbolic of one of the biggest issues conservationists face when working with non-charismatic species. “Non-charismatic” is the term that biologists give when species aren’t cute or well-liked by the public. We don’t want to call them ugly in official documents and discussions.

Non-charismatic species are just as important to the ecosystem as cuter ones, and have just as much right to live. But conserving these animals can be difficult, as the public tends to be less sympathetic or even downright disdainful of them. It’s hard to make change when people don’t give a [bleep] about the species you’re trying to protect!

With all of the struggles their population has faced, it’s encouraging to see how conservation work is paying off for the California Condor now. Today, it is estimated that there are around 500 both in the wild and in captive breeding programs. In addition to their spiritual importance to Native Americans, they are incredibly important ecologically. As scavengers, they remove dead animals from the landscape, reducing spread of disease and keeping the environment clean. They are the sanitation workers of nature, who deserve respect for their roles.

Photo Caption: A California Condor and it’s recently hatched chick

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