Nature Note

California Condor

One of the largest soaring birds that ever lived, the giant California condor, is being pushed to the edge of extinction by cattlemen, oilmen, recreation-minded people and sportsmen.

This huge bird, Gymnogyps californianus, has a wingspan of about nine feet, and when grown weighs about 20 pounds. It is a majestic sight when soaring, its body dark brown with a white patch under each huge wing. Its bare head is orange when the bird is an adult. This same type of condor used to soar over much of North America as long ago as the Ice Age. Its bones have been found as far southeast as Florida. Today there may be only 40 or 50 of these prehistoric-looking birds left, all surviving in two protected areas in California—the Sisquoc Condor Sanctuary in Santa Barbara County, and another sanctuary in Ventura County.

Several things have led to the decline of these birds. One is the long time needed for egg laying and for breeding. A female lays only a single egg, every other year—usually on the bare rock of a high mountain cave or on a pile of boulders. Incubation takes 42 days, and the young are completely dependent upon their parents for a full seven months, and partially dependent for another seven. If anything happens to one parent, the other may not manage feeding the offspring, since these birds must sometimes fly 40 or 50 miles to find the food they need. Also the condor is a very shy bird. If a person approaches the nesting area, it retreats, sometimes for so long a time that when it returns, the offspring has starved to death.

Condors are scavengers only. They do not kill, contrary to popular belief of stockmen who accuse them of destroying newborn lambs, calves and foals. Unlike the eagles, condors have no sharp talons; they have nails. Their feet are like a turkey's. Condors live on decaying carcasses of animals already dead, they formerly were one of America's best cleaning squads for keeping the land clear of dead creatures. Much of their food supply has dwindled, for the great herds of elk, deer and pronghorns have also disappeared.

LETTERS

To the Editor

Phonetic Alphabet

Dear Sir:

In the Feb. 11, 1967 publication of SCIENCE NEWS appeared an article entitled "Wuns upon a tiem," in which I felt you were over critical of the Initial Teaching Alphabet.

I am not familiar with Dr. William B. Gillooly's work in the area of reading but I do know that Dr. Arthur Gates has published materials for the use of teaching reading. His criticism is of a personal nature because Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz has dared to invade this sacred field.

As for the U.S. Office of Education, could it be it is frightened because i/t/a has its origins in Great Britain rather than in this country?

We have enjoyed outstanding success using i/t/a and feel it definitely has a place in the teaching of reading, particularly to the non-English speaking, the illiterates, and semi-literates. We advocate its use to all who inquire as to its success at our institution.

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Labs Defended

Dear Sir:

I have submitted a statement to Senator Hart's Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly which supplies considerable evidence on the accuracy and medical reliability of tests done by U.S. medical laboratories.

I support the proposed Federal legislation to regulate and improve medical laboratories in the United States (SN: 2/18). However, I should like to point out that the figure (used in the hearing) of 25 percent of tests being erroneous is not correct. It was based on very limited surveys on very special types of medical laboratories—not at all representative. Further allegations that 40 to 80 percent of blood smears are unsatisfactory and that 30 to 50 percent of clinical chemistry is unsatisfactory are equally incorrect.

The thousands of dedicated medical technologists, clinical chemists, clinical microbiologists, clinical pathologists, and pathologists who are working and on call 24 hours per day, 365 days a year, should not suffer the stain of this unfounded figure.

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