

## FAQ – The Condor’s Shadow

Produced and Directed by Jeff McLoughlin

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### 1. What inspired you to become a filmmaker?

Photography is something that’s been a part of my life since high school. I was inspired by the Jacques Cousteau ocean wildlife films as a youth and went on to study film theory and production at San Francisco State. After college I returned to Santa Barbara to pursue business opportunities and I deferred on my aspirations to be a filmmaker. Later in life the opportunity came up to produce corporate video and by that point digital video production made independent filmmaking more viable. I worked with a number of talented people including local filmmaker Ethan Turpin and along the way developed the skill set to direct and produce. Professionally, I’ve produced dozens corporate films and last year’s SBIFF entry, *The Non-Lead Hunter* with Anthony Prieto. *The Condor’s Shadow* is my first feature length documentary.

### 2. What's the basic concept behind your film?

*The Condor’s Shadow* is an environmental documentary on the recovery of the California condor. It is a wildlife film but at its heart it’s a story about the passion it takes to pull a species back from the brink of extinction. Reduced to a population of just twenty-two birds by 1982, the species has been restored to over four hundred today. The narrative of the film follows Ventura-based biologist Joseph Brandt, on a quest to establish a successful wild nest for a pair of condors in the wild. The extreme lengths that Joseph and the others in the recovery effort go to in pursuit of this goal make this an interesting and emotionally engaging film.

Filmed over two years, the film weaves a concise history of the recovery effort into the contemporary story of the program today. Segments shot in the San Diego, Los Angeles and Oregon Zoo’s reveal the complexities of the species recovery effort. Peter Alagona, UCSB environmental historian places the program in historical context. The condor story has its roots in Santa Barbara and the film includes a segment with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History’s Janet Hamber, a biologist with a forty-year history with the condor recovery effort. She relates the trapping and capture of the very last of the wild California condors in 1987, a poignant and moving moment.

### 3. What led you to create this film?

I was inspired by a story on the condor program in the *Santa Barbara Independent* by Matt Kettmann. Matt is a gifted writer and captured the nuance as well as the dilemma of the endangered species recovery program. I knew after reading his work that this was a story worth telling on film.

#### 4. Does the film have an entry point that hooks the viewer?

We get up close and personal with a bird named Pitahsi, (a Chumash name meaning “the power within”) and come to understand the broad reach humans have into the remote corners of the backcountry. The interactions that biologist Joseph Brandt has with this condor are probably the most compelling scenes in the film

The film works on several engaging levels. First, as a wildlife film, condors are simply magnificent in to see flight. If you are enamored with the beauty of wild things and wild places this story has an obvious appeal. Eight minutes into the film it really gets going as biologists rappel down a sheer rock face to enter the nest of a condor. It fun to see and captivating to recognize the passion that goes into this work. On a more cerebral level I think viewers will find the film revealing as environmental success story. Although the condor is certainly a conservation program dependent species, it's still pretty remarkable that we've managed to save this bird from extinction.

Much of *The Condor's Shadow* was shot in the dramatic canyons Los Padres National Forest where California condors have nested for thousands of years. Every condor is significant to the species recovery effort so biologists engage in a carefully managed process to ensure nesting success. Condors nest in open cavities in rock faces and lay just a single egg, often as infrequently as every other year. Biologists enter the wild condor nests by rappelling down sheer vertical rock walls to gain access. We filmed the interactions as they rappel into the nests and outfitted the biologists with helmet-mounted cameras to capture the action with the growing chicks. Over a nine-month nesting season condors grow from a quarter pound to nearly twenty so these interactions with biologist can be quite comical. The parents, including a feisty condor named Pitahsi, are also quite aggressive defenders of their nests and this adds to the drama of the story.

Condors are enormous birds that commonly weigh twenty pounds and have a wingspan of nine and a half feet. Filming them in flight was a near spiritual experience for me. They come in close to investigate and you can hear the wind rushing through their outstretched wings. Both on the ground and in the air they are incredibly photogenic.

#### 5. During the process of creating this film, what did you learn or experience that was most surprising?

Condors approached extinction due to exposure to lead that they ingest while scavenging on the remains of hunter-shot game. It's an ongoing dilemma for the condor recovery effort and the film examines this in the context of the wildlife story.

#### 6. How is your film special?

What I set out to make in *The Condor's Shadow* is a film that lays out the commitment it takes to save a species from extinction. That passion is really what has driven the successful recovery of the California condor. Without the heart that the biologist and zookeepers put into this work on a daily basis this species would be gone from the earth.

7. What do you hope viewers come away with after watching the film?

Not many would ever have imagined that spent lead ammunition in hunter-shot game would harm a beautiful soaring bird. But it does and with just a few small changes we can fix that. I hope people will mention this to their friends who hunt and those who manage nuisance animals on ranch lands. Hunting actually provides a great food source to condors and other scavengers. A simple change from a lead bullet to a copper one would mean one less toxic substance cast out onto the earth by humans. Yes it will cost a few extra dollars. But I think most would agree that watching a bird with a ten-foot wingspan soar over you head is worth every penny.

8. What's your Santa Barbara connection? Do you live in Santa Barbara? How Long?

I've lived in Santa Barbara since 1969, attended Santa Barbara High, built a successful business and raised two children here with my wife Kristi.

9. How does living in Santa Barbara support you as a filmmaker?

There is a robust community of writers, filmmakers and post-production talent here in Santa Barbara that I've found very supportive. Matt Kettmann help out with editing and rewriting my long-winded narration for the film. Local filmmakers Ethan Turpin, Donnie Hedden and Ky Shultz, a Brooks Institute grad, shot significant segments in *The Condor's Shadow*. It's a great place to be creative and what I can't source here in terms of post-production is just a ninety minute drive away.

10. Does your film capture some aspect today's cultural gestalt or zeitgeist? In what way?

I think we have entered a phase in human history where most acknowledge that our impacts on the earth have many unintended consequences. The larger message of the film is in seeing that we can make an impact as individuals. With commitment we can leave the world a slightly better place than when we entered it both for the environment and for humanity.