

1 August 2008

The Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) is one of the largest flying birds in the world with a wingspan of up to 10.5 feet / 3.2 meters and weighing up to 33 lbs. / 15 kg. It is a soaring bird, only flapping its wings about once an hour and unable to fly without the aid of thermal updrafts.

It is highly specialized for eating carrion, preferably the dead bodies of large animals such as cattle, deer or, of course, unlucky humans. Its beak is capable of easily ripping through tough, thick skin. Its head and long neck are featherless and suited to extending deep into its food.

Being a scavenger, the Andean condor generally prefers dead animals, but it is known to eat anything it considers dead.

The Andean condor roosts at elevations of 10,000 to 16,000 ft / 3,000 to 5,000 m, generally on bare rock. Because of its preference for very high altitudes it is rarely seen by humans. When an Andean condor is spotted, it is usually just a small, dark, slowly circling spot in the sky.



Andean condor, typical ground view.

Canon 1DMk3 EF 28-300mm F3.5-5.6L IS USM @300, 390mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1250 @ F9, ISO 200

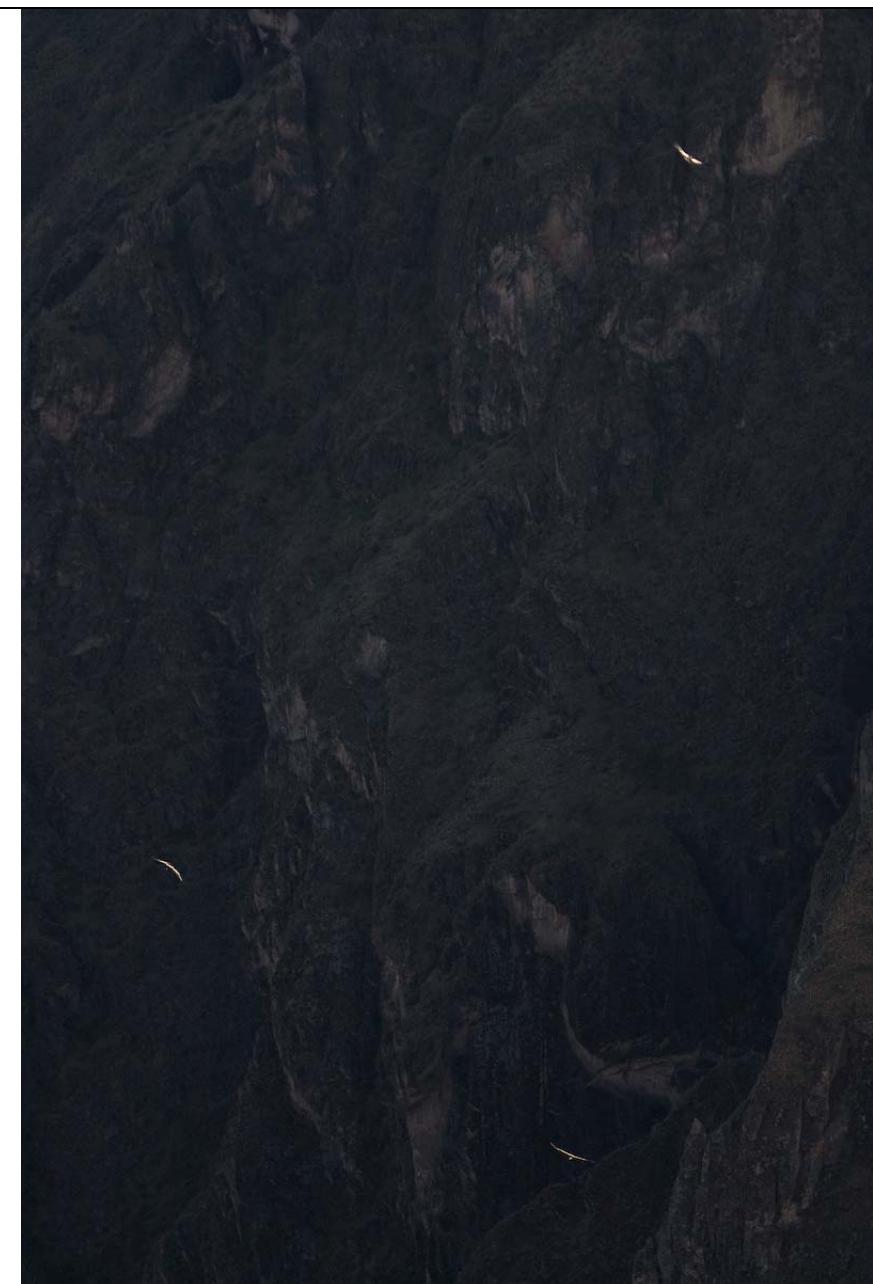
The general rule of thumb for humans is that if you are close enough to see an Andean condor's face, it could be a very, very bad day.

But, all of those rules are predicated on elevations typical of human occupation.

If you find yourself up at the elevations where the Andean condor lives, breeds and hunts, it's a whole new ballgame.

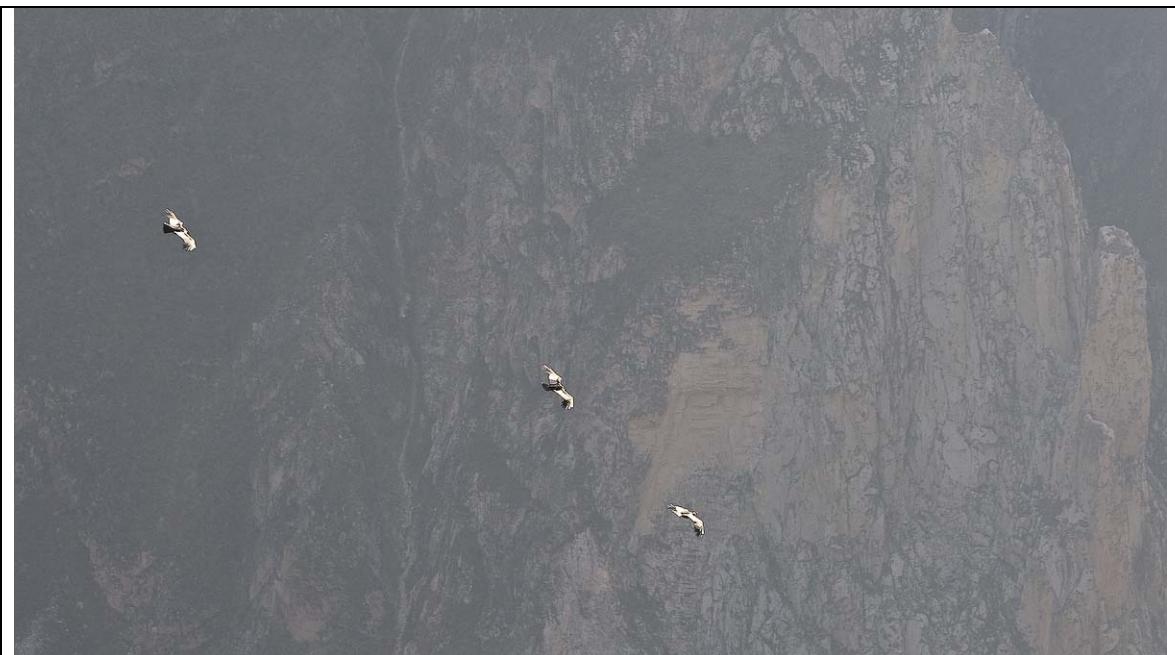
Angels 12

You can suddenly find yourself looking down on slowly circling condors instead of up at them.



Andean condors riding the updrafts

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @140mm, 182mm 35mm equivalent
1/800 @ F6.3, ISO 640



Andean condors riding the updrafts

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @170mm, 221mm 35mm equivalent; 1/250 @ F9, ISO 500

And if they ride the updrafts up to your altitude, you can look at the tops of their wings instead of the bottoms.



Andean condor, top view

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @420mm, 546mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1000 @ F8, ISO 500

You can even discern a juvenile from an adult.



Juvenile Andean condor

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @510mm, 663mm 35mm equivalent; 1/800 @ F8, ISO 640



Juvenile Andean condor

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @350mm, 455mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1000 @ F7.1, ISO 500

You can watch them soar with no movement other than steering with their tail and slight changes in the long individual “fingertip” feathers at the ends of their wings.



Juvenile Andean condor steering with tail and fingertip feathers

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @520mm, 676mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1000 @ F8, ISO 500

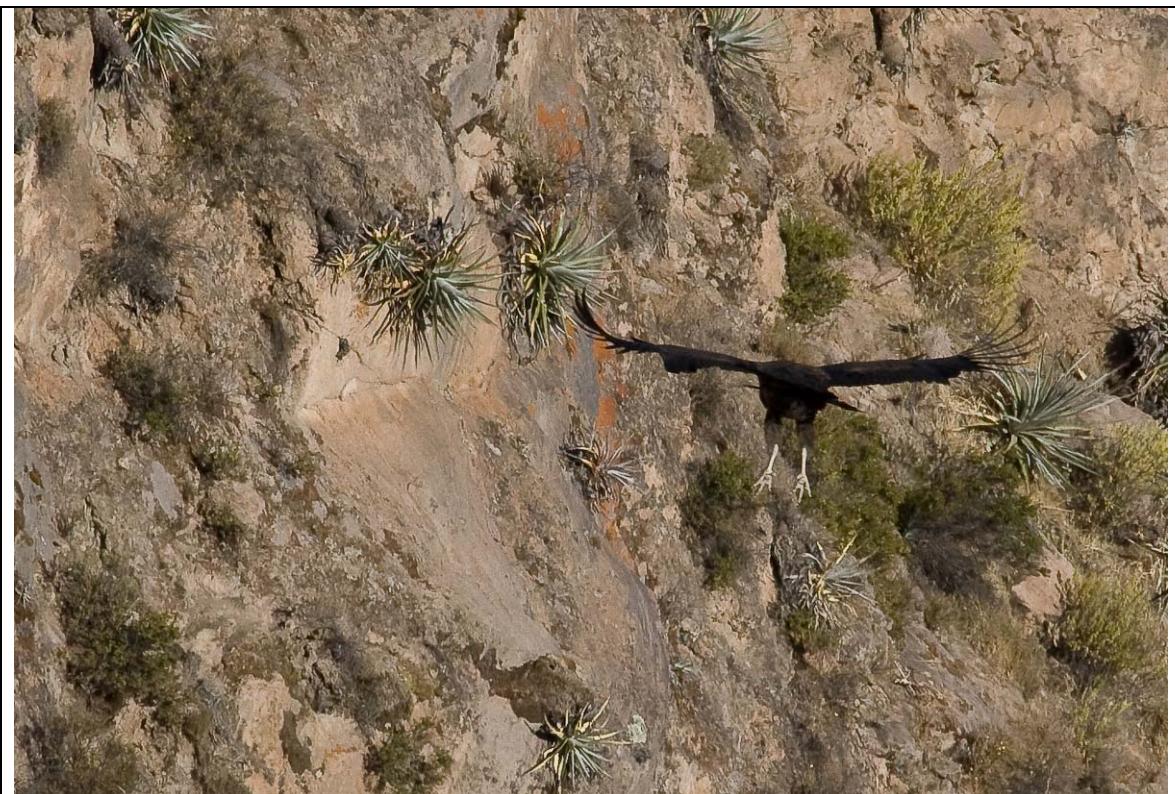
Angels 12

You can catch glimpses of their claws.



Andean condor, legs extended

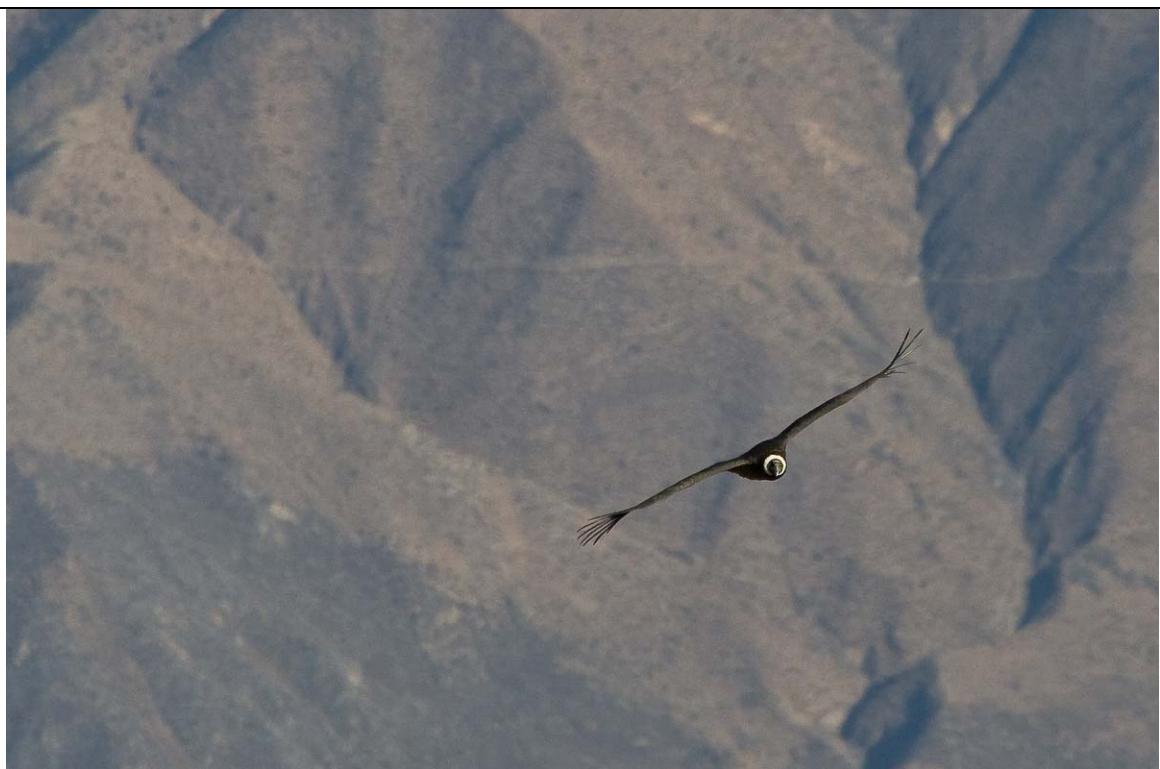
Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @560mm, 728mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1000 @ F8, ISO 500



Andean condor, legs extended

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @560mm, 728mm 35mm equivalent; 1/500 @ F13, ISO 500

And if you are very, very lucky, you may see an Andean condor face to face.



Andean condor

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @560mm, 728mm 35mm equivalent; 1/640 @ F10, ISO 500



Andean condor

Canon 1DMk3 EF 28-300mm F3.5-5.6L IS USM @300, 390mm 35mm equivalent; 1/400 @ F7.1, ISO 400

Or even eye to eye.



Juvenile Andean condor

Canon 1DMk3 EF100-400mm F4.5-5.6L IS USM w/1.4x @435mm, 566mm 35mm equivalent; 1/1000 @ F8, ISO 400

But if you want to meet them where the condors live, you must get very, very high.

You must get up over 12,000 feet in altitude.

Or, as the pilots say, up over Angels 12.

Angels 12 is at Colca Canyon, Peru. S15.61244 W71.90408

Our campsite elevation there was 12,421 feet / 3,786 meters.

Andean condors live along the western edge of South America, ranging from Columbia, where they are very rare, south to the southern tip of the continent. They live to be up to 50 years old in the wild. Andean condors mate for life and produce a single egg every two years, which is incubated about 60 days by both parents. They remain juvenile until age six years.

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>