

The Pinnacles Press

Pinnacles National Park, California

1 July, 2022

Happy Fourth of July



*El
Cónдор
Pasa*

Soarín' over California

	Inside
El Cónдор Pasa	Page 3
Freedumb	Page 6
Guide to photos	Page 10



Morning fog

Soledad, California
Salinas Valley

El Cóndor Pasa

Pinnacles National Park is one of the newest, smallest and least-visited of the United States' national parks, having only been "promoted" to a 26,000-acre national park in 2013 under President Barack Obama after its original national monument status was granted under President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. That makes it the 59th of the 63 national parks currently in the system.

It's always been a strange place.

In its center are ridges of weird spires and crags surrounded by the rounded benign hills of the Gabilan Range, which was created by the San Andreas Fault along the edge of the Salinas Valley ([read more about the fault's role in mountain-building and other facets of coastal California in my April newsletter](#)). Lo and behold, Pinnacle's volcanic rocks are different from their neighbors. Their geologic fingerprints match those of a volcanic area in the Tehachapi Mountains near Lancaster, 200 miles to the southeast, which also lies on the fault. It has taken 23 million years and countless earthquakes for the Pinnacles' pinnacles to drift that far northward with the Pacific tectonic plate, leaving their relatives on the North American Plate (eastern side) in the dust.

But as spectacular as the pinnacles are to hike among, the birds who live there are why I chose this park for my annual Fourth of July hike and newsletter. Forty years ago, there were only 22 California condors — which once roamed the Pacific coasts of Canada, United States and Mexico — left on the planet. The birth of a condor chick in May added to a [current population now more than 500](#), about 60% of whom are living in the wild at Pinnacles, Big Sur, southern Utah, the Grand Canyon and Baja California, Mexico. A breeding pair has been introduced to Redwood National Park in the far northwestern corner of California.

Condors are scavengers, and their love of carrion — they eat dead seals and whales washed up on beaches and wildlife and cattle carcasses inland — makes them susceptible to lead poisoning, the primary cause of their near extinction. They ingest lead when the dead animals they eat were killed by hunters using lead bullets. No judging panel that includes humans would give these naked-headed vultures a prize in a beauty pageant. But an adult condor can put one wingtip on the floor and touch a basketball rim with the other, making condors the largest bird in North America.

They are so rare that there is a ["studbook" tracing the family history of every bird since the original 22 were captured](#) in the 1980s when a breeding program funded by the National Park Service, among other government and private agencies, was begun. Most birds are born in captivity, but slowly more are being released into the wild, and nesting and hatching is increasing at Pinnacles. That flock is related to and interacts with the Big Sur flock managed by the [Ventana Wildlife Society](#), which has a captive breeding program. [Here's a 27-minute Ventana condor video.](#)

Seeing a condor at Pinnacles or anywhere outside a zoo is a hit-or-miss thing. There are lots of big, soaring birds in the park and you have to be able to see the distinctive white markings on the underside of their wings or one of the numbered tags attached by scientists to know it's not a turkey vulture, for example.

The bird on the cover that passed above me at the intersection of the Juniper Canyon and High Peaks trails at the top of the park was a condor.



< Park ranger monitoring condors with radio tracking

High-wire act

High Peaks Trail
Pinnacles NP



Lunch break

CAL FIRE hand crew

Junction of High Peaks and Juniper Canyon trails

Freedom

What do we celebrate on the Fourth of July, also known as Independence Day? Americans agree we should celebrate it with massive pieces of meat cooked over a fire with fireworks for dessert. The previous resident of the White House — perhaps despondent over too few folks saluting him — found that recipe inadequate and wanted to add a huge helping of tanks and military parading down Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Fourth comes just five weeks after Memorial Day, which commemorates soldiers, sailors and marines who died serving the country, and five months before Veterans Day, which honors all those who served in the military. That's as many holidays as Jesus gets. "Only two defining forces have ever offered to die for you:" goes the Facebook meme. "Jesus Christ and the American soldier. One died for your soul, the other died for your freedom."

It's true the 13 British colonies along the Atlantic coast of what's now the United States couldn't have been considered truly independent until October 19, 1781, when the Revolutionary War ended with British Gen. Cornwallis' surrender to George Washington at Yorktown. That's what the guys playing the fife, drum and carrying muskets in Fourth of July parades represent. Or, if you really want to be legally precise, independence came when the Treaty of Paris was signed in that city on September 3, 1783.

The Revolutionary War began in 1775, more than a year before the Continental Congress voted for independence July 2, 1776. But Americans celebrate July 4, 1776, as Independence Day because that's the day the Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence. A document — the explanation for the independence vote to be mailed to the king — is what captured the public mind. "When in the course of human events ..."

Still, there always has been a strong militaristic sentiment in our celebration of the Declaration and the freedom it created for Americans to rule themselves. "Freedom isn't free," is this sentiment's slogan. But measuring freedom's cost only in military blood and bodies vastly understates freedom's real cost. It absolves civilians of our own responsibility and sacrifices we must make to protecting it.

As well, we have a wildly inconsistent national history of ensuring that our freedoms are equally shared, despite the Declaration's declaration of equality and partly because of the document's use of the word "men." Only a minority of us would choose that word if we were starting with a blank parchment today. Not only is that because "men" is a gender specific word, but because we know it was also understood by 18th Century British Americans to exclude people they did not even consider to be human, among them black people and our continent's native inhabitants.

Language is no minor issue. Two-thirds of our current Supreme Court follows, to some degree, the late Justice Antonin Scalia's concept of "originalism" when interpreting our other founding document, the Constitution. The question originalists ask is: What did people of the time that

document was written understand the document's words to mean? A question they don't ask, or perhaps even consider relevant, is the practical one: How can an evolving society govern itself if its laws are captive to past prejudices and tribalism by a minority of the governed?

All of this enlarges the philosophical space to divide our society and the world into "us" and "them" and allows some of the most privileged people in the world to deceive ourselves into believing the problems we created for others aren't our responsibility to fix.

We recognize terrorism as terrible, for example, but some of us see it only as an act committed from afar. Lynching, which once was openly supported by law enforcement agencies in some communities, only became a federal crime in May. Hate and militia groups are openly encouraged as legitimate politics, which is an issue in the congressional investigation into the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

Our society pays a heavy cost from the insecurity and unrest of past injustice we've hardly addressed. It's like a basketball game played between two teams in which only one is allowed to score 3-point goals. Then rules are equalized, but the game continues without adjusting the score to eliminate the past inequity.

Conservative states are passing or considering laws making it illegal to teach about this kind of injustice — Critical Race Theory — as it applies to racial equality. The stated reason is that white Americans might feel bad about themselves, but I suspect the real reason has less to do with self-esteem than fear it could result in some form of reparations.

Rules favor the rule makers. When rule-making authority is limited within a society, as has been American history from the day of the Declaration, achieving equality threatens a privilege, which includes wealth. The stakes are enormous. Many of the immigrants who founded and built this country came here because they were excluded by a pyramid of privilege in the lands they left — the second, third and fourth sons of English landowners who could not inherit the estate, the Catholics who were second-class subjects of a Protestant monarch. The list of injustices is nearly limitless.

The question that consumed many 18th Century intellectuals was whether this mishmash of lower status peoples could actually congeal into a functioning new nation. That American intellectuals shared this fear with their counterparts across the pond is reflected in the checks and balances they wrote into the Constitution as well as preferences toward property ownership, once a voting requirement, and rural agricultural states that it contains.

But a question that apparently did not get enough consideration was whether the object of America's founders was to create a nation that erased the privilege pyramid altogether or simply establish a new one in America. Our founding documents, fading in their glass cases at the National Archives, are murkier on that.

It's easier to look toward the Capitol, the Supreme Court and White House to determine our direction. Right now, it's backward.



Destination in sight

Lower Juniper Canyon Trail

Pinnacles NP



Tight squeeze

High Peaks Trail
Pinnacles NP

Guide to photos

Photos are listed from cover to back page. **The boldface lead-in** matches the name of the photo in the boxed caption.

Soarin' over California — The picture name comes from a hang-glider ride at Disneyland's California Adventure park. *El Cóndor Pasa*, "the condor passes" or, perhaps more appropriately, "the condor flies by," is the name of a song made famous in the United States by Simon & Garfunkel in 1970 on their album "Bridge Over Troubled Water." Paul Simon wrote English lyrics to the song, but the tune comes from Peru, which is home to the Andean condor, an even larger bird than its California cousin. It was written by Daniel Alomía Robles in 1913 based on folk tunes from the Peruvian Andes as part of a kind of musical play called a *zarzuela*. You can listen to the original piano instrumental version of the tune on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/mUR7GRsCbjg>. The familiar part of the tune begins at 1:30.

Morning fog — Residents of the Salinas Valley are awakening beneath the cool, damp blanket of the "marine layer" — fog — that flowed the previous night over the ridge of the Inner Coast Ranges from the Pacific Ocean, which lies just on the other side. The picture was shot from the road leading from the town of Soledad into the west entrance of Pinnacles National Park.

High-wire act — Not long after I shot this picture as I was moving up the High Peaks Trail, I met the woman who was on the cliff in this picture. I recognized her wide-brimmed hat that I could see through my telephoto lens, and she confirmed where she had been. She was carrying a directional antenna and other radio equipment in her backpack. I didn't use a telephoto shot for the newsletter, however, because this view gives you a better sense of what hiking through the pinnacles is like.

Lunch break — Early on my hike uphill on the Juniper Canyon Trail, I was passed by about a dozen members of a CAL FIRE "hand crew" in helmets and full protective clothing, carrying chain saws, pick axes, shovels and other equipment used to battle California's summer wildfires. They said they were training for the fire season to come. Later, I caught up with them at the top of the ridge where they had stopped for lunch. CAL FIRE, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, employs from 12 to 17 prison inmates and juvenile wards under a fire captain for each hand crew. About 4,300 inmates and wards live in 39 conservation camps scattered across the state and work also as search and rescue emergency responders during floods and other disasters.

Destination in sight — I hiked a 4.3-mile / 6.9-kilometer loop from the Chapparal parking area to the top of the park following the Juniper Canyon, High Peaks and Tunnel trails. You can see the top, about a 1,200-foot / 365-meter climb, through the trees at this point low on the Juniper Canyon Trail.

Tight squeeze — The High Peaks Trail is steep and narrow with steps hacked into the rock more than a century ago. But it's the highlight of the park and a good place to see condors soar over Condor Gulch to the south. This section requires someone of normal adult height to bend beneath the rock overhang and then crouch to make room for your backpack.

Descending from on high (next page) — This is the north end of the High Peaks Trail not far from its junction with the Tunnel Trail, which is where I turned off to begin my return to Juniper Canyon and the valley at the bottom.

Condors >

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Hikers >

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Descending from on high

Hikers and condors
High Peaks Trail