

Flying the Condor Kite

I love climbing mountains, and when you reach the peak, condors sometimes come close, being naturally curious creatures. They glide majestically, taking advantage of the thermals to rise to incredible heights, and not a feather seems to move. To be visited by condors on an outing is awe-inspiring and wonderful.

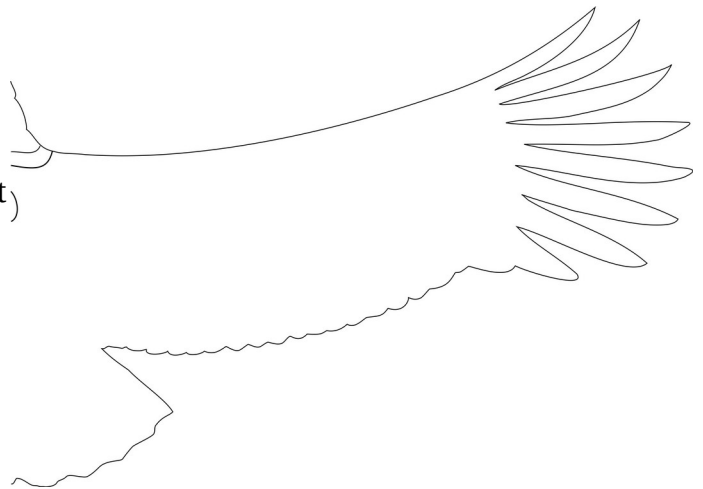
The biggest threat to condors are the toxic baits set by humans to poison pumas, foxes or wild dogs eating their livestock. When the condors feed on these carcasses, up to 30 at a time, they get poisoned in turn. Their numbers are dwindling.

To design a condor kite, I got in touch with our local ecological organization, S.N.A.P. (Sociedad Naturalista Andino Patagónica). They introduced me to Lorenzo Sympson, president of the association, and an ornithologist specializing in the Andean Condor. He provided me with valuable information, films and visual material, which I used as a guide to make the first kite plan.



The objective was to make a life-size condor kite, with a 3-meter wingspan, which seen from afar would look like the silhouette of a condor in the sky. Its flight would be filmed, and we would give talks for the general public about the Andean Condor and its present situation, raising awareness within our community about the threats that condors face.

I started work on a silhouette of a condor that served to make the outline of the kite plan. This is the first plan, a half, because one wants to be sure that it will be perfectly symmetrical. Later it has to be duplicated. Notice that the wings are curved upward (it would be forwards in flight), and the wingtip feathers (flight feathers) are also curved.

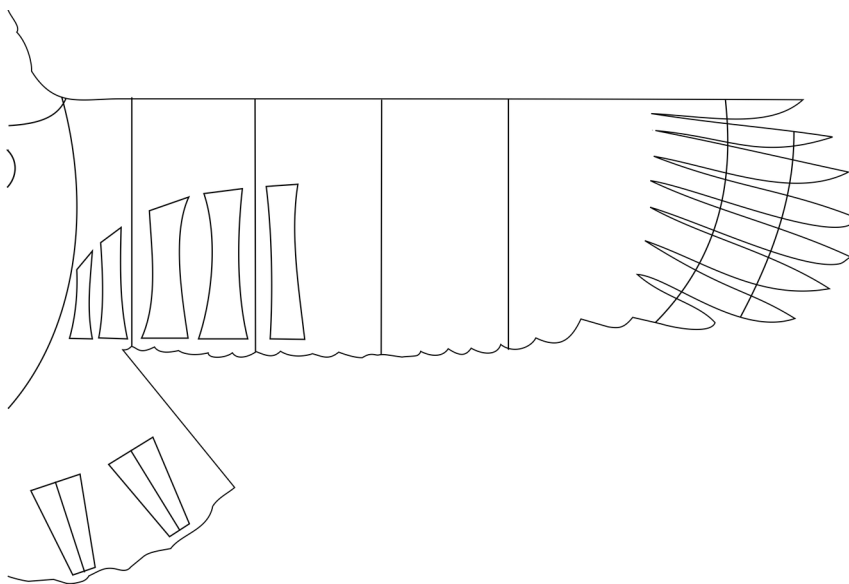


I made the first prototype in white synthetic cloth. I flew it many times, making changes in the setup of the rods, and cutting vents in the cloth to let the wind pass through and increase stability, because it had a large surface area and would pull much too hard in just a slight wind. The kite is all patched up from having cut so many holes in it! I was aiming for that majestic gliding so typical of condors, but with a three-meter-wide kite, I soon realized how complicated it would be to achieve.

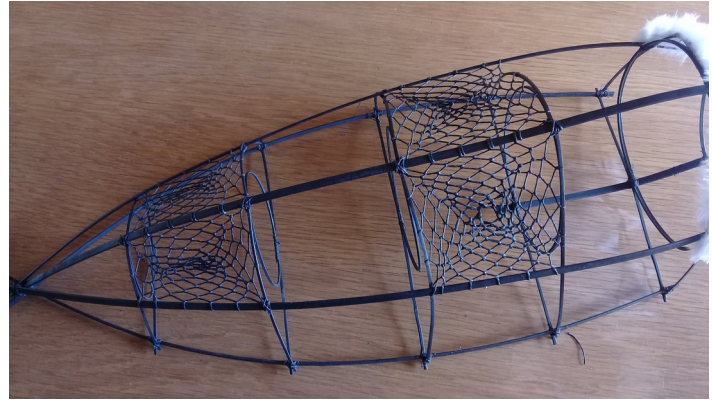
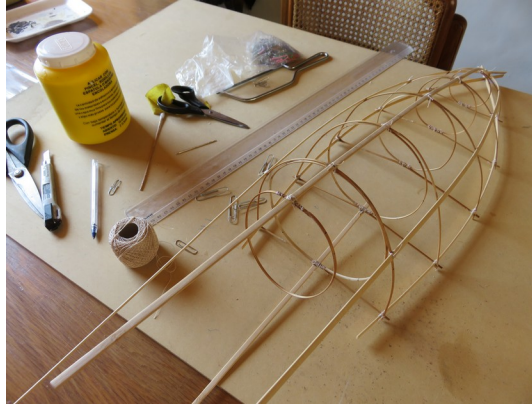


I spent three months doing test flights, and although after many crashes, I finally got the condor to fly high, it tended to overpass the zenith and freefall to land head first into a prickly bush. Very unmajestic.

When I changed the plan, placing the wings at 90 degrees, and straightening the flight feathers, things improved noticeably. The feathers are joined with strips of transparent PVC, moving in unison. I determined which were the best vents to shed air, and finally, the solution for not overpassing the zenith, was to sew half-windsocks at the base of the tail. These create drag, slowing the kite down. This great idea was proposed to me by Pablo Machiavello, of BATOCO kite club.



During lockdown, flying was totally restricted, so I started looking at photos of condors again and decided to add a body, like a basket. It would be made of bamboo. Once I had the structure made, I started making dreamcatchers as a covering. This was quite soothing during lockdown, and the condor became a dream condor. The body is optional, the kite can fly with or without it.



After four months, lockdown was eased and we flew the dream condor and filmed it. Being such a large kite, it flies in a gentle breeze. I actually have two condors, since I painted the white prototype black, and can fly them both together (Flight of the Condor Kites <https://youtu.be/LG5vdWYvFYg> and https://youtu.be/AMZYGGiAMw8?si=eKI_e3cAhtGJek5O).

The project concluded with a Zoom presentation organized by S.N.A.P., where I explained how I had made the kites, and Dr Lorenzo Simpson shared his vast knowledge and experience studying and monitoring these incredible birds. (<https://youtu.be/tR8MDuI1pEQ>)



Diane Ross
May 2022