



Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

February 2017

Field Notes



Larry Meade, Creative Commons

General Description

The first signs of spring are not always on the ground. Search the sky in late February for migrant turkey vultures drifting back to western Oregon to breed. Though similarly dark and almost as large (6-foot wingspan; 4 lbs) as a golden eagle, a turkey vulture is distinguished by its tilted, rocking flight and wings aimed slightly upward in a dihedral. The underside of its flight feathers shines a silvery grey, in contrast to its dark brown body. Its small, bald head is red in adults and grey in juveniles. It resides in the New World vulture family, Cathartidae, along with condors. *Cathartes*, comes from the Greek word for purifier or cleanser—appropriate for a scavenger.

Habitat, Distribution and Migration

Widely distributed, turkey vultures breed from Canada to South America. Northern populations are migratory, but year-round residents occur in coastal California and further south. A mix of open farm and rangeland for foraging and forest cover for roosting is ideal habitat.

Diet

Turkey vultures feed on a wide variety of carrion, from livestock to small mammals to roadkill snakes. Their small, weak feet,

unlike those of most raptors, are rarely capable of taking live prey. Their keen sense of smell—stronger than other vultures and most birds—can detect carrion at long distances and from under forested canopy.

Jeff Whitlock, Creative Commons



Burying their entire heads inside a carcass, as turkey vultures do, would be a very messy affair were it not for two special adaptations: a bald head and protected nasal

openings. The arch-like opening behind the beak shelters the nostrils and allows for easier cleaning.

Behavior

Daytime foragers, lone turkey vultures cruise low over open spaces in search of carrion using both keen eyesight and smell. They flock together at night roosts and during migration. You may spot them perched with outstretched wings held up and away from their bodies in the “horaltic” pose. This wing position can help them warm up, dry out, or even cool down.



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Befitting their indelicate habits, grunts and hisses—emitted at nest intruders—are the extent of their vocalizations. They lack the typical bird’s voice box (syrinx).

Reproduction

Turkey vultures form monogamous and potentially lifelong pairs during the breeding season. Courtship includes a *Follow Flight*, where one bird follows behind and above the other, sometimes matching the leader’s twists and turns. In spring, they typically lay 2 eggs on the flat surface of a rocky cliff ledge, cave, hollow log or abandoned building. The cream-

colored eggs are 2.5 to 3 inches long with brown spots. For 5 to 6 weeks, both male and female share incubation duties. After hatching, nestlings are cared for by both adults until they fledge, at 8 to 10 weeks.

Conservation

Currently, turkey vulture populations are stable. Once killed for fear that they spread livestock diseases, such as hog cholera, foot-and-mouth disease, and anthrax, turkey vultures were gradually shown to be beneficial. Their digestive tracts actually destroy many of these pathogens, removing them from the food web. They do remain vulnerable to lead poisoning from gunshot in carcasses, as well as other environmental contaminants, such as mercury and insecticides in their food.

Fun Facts

- To deter nest intruders, both young and adult turkey vultures can vomit foul-smelling, partially digested food.
- Turkey vultures urinate on their legs (urohydrolysis) for evaporative cooling when overheated. The acidity of the excrement may also kill bacteria on their legs left over from feeding.
- What do you call a cluster of turkey vultures at a carcass? A “wake.”

Where to See

Turkey vultures occur in all Klamath Network parks, and are known breeders at Whiskeytown NRA and Redwood National and State Parks.

More Information

<https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/turvul/introduction>

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/turkey_vulture/lifehistory