

The Turkey Vulture

*The vulture's a grim apparition
With appetite gross! In addition
His manners are crummy,
And if he gets too chummy
Please check with your family physician.*

Everybody is familiar with the Turkey Vulture. They are large birds and we see them all over Mendocino County. They are among the more common and obvious visitors to the Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project. The red head of the adult gives it some resemblance to a wild turkey and that is the derivation of its name. Its featherless head and neck are an adaptation to part of its dining habit--- sticking its head into animal carcasses to eat carrion. The bald head prevents pieces of the meal and the associated organisms from sticking to feathers. Sometimes incorrectly called a Buzzard (properly a term for an Old World group of hawks), Turkey Vultures are one of 7 species of New World Vultures. These birds can trace their ancestry back about 35 million years! Interestingly, recent DNA studies have revealed that they may be more closely related to Storks and Ibises than they are to raptors.

Turkey Vultures have more of their nervous system dedicated to smell than any other bird. This keen sense of smell and their great eyesight enable them to find carcasses from distances greater than a mile. And contrary to common belief, they prefer meat as fresh as possible. Given the choice, they will not eat extremely rotted carcasses. Surprisingly, they also are known to eat insects and plant material including shoreline vegetation, pumpkins, and other crops. While their bills are sharp and strong, and capable of tearing open the toughest cowhide, their feet are weak and more resemble those of chickens than of hawks. They are the only scavenging birds that are unable to kill their own prey.

Gentle and non-aggressive, these birds communicate by sound only with hisses and grunts. They are extremely secretive nesters, and nest by scratching out an indentation in protected remote places like caves, rock jumbles, or hollow trees. Raising only 1 brood a year, usually of 2 young, it takes as long as 4 months from egg laying to fledging. They can live an average of about 20 years. Turkey Vultures usually roost in communal groups and forage alone during the day. They are often observed with their wings spread, backs to the sun. It is believed that this pose serves several functions: drying the flight feathers, warming the body, and drying and destroying harmful organisms picked up during their scavenging. While weighing only 2-4 pounds, adults have wing spans of nearly 6 feet. They fly with their wings in a slightly upturned "V" pattern. This posture, and their light weight and long wings and flight feathers, enable them to glide buoyantly in the

thermals. Watch as they twist and turn to take advantage of every uplift of air; they appear to wobble as they soar. This allows them to cover surprisingly large areas as they both search for food and migrate. A bird banded in a Hopland Field Station study this summer with a large, numbered wing patch was later seen foraging along the coast 20 miles north of Fort Bragg!! A second individual from this study was seen with hundreds of other Turkey Vultures along the Kern River east of Bakersfield. They were migrating south to Mexico and beyond.

Ask any student at the RVOEP Flight School what the Turkey Vulture's job is-- how it makes its living? They can tell you that it is a scavenger and cleans up dead animals. In fact, the scientific name for its genus, *Cathartes*, is derived from the Greek word for "cleanser" or "purifier." It does its job well. It is one of the few birds today that actually has an increasing population. It is believed that this is partly in response to more cars and roads and the increasing availability of food from road-kills. Turkey Vultures are survivors. They have successfully exploited a very specialized ecological niche that has allowed them and their ancestors to survive many millions of years. We should try to remember that whenever we are inclined to consider their "appetite gross."

By Chuck Vaughn, Peregrine Audubon