



DO YOU KNOW.....ABOUT TURKEY VULTURES

By Kathleen Handley, Staff

One of the most misunderstood birds is the turkey vulture. One of the two vulture species found in our area, they are large with dark brown feathers covering all of their body except their legs, feet and head, which are red in color, making them resemble wild turkeys from afar (hence the name). They are disliked by many because they are associated with death, though the truth of the matter is that they do not hunt or kill; they are nature's cleaning crew. After the death of another species, such as a deer hit by a car, they clean up the carcass. If not for vultures, the planet would be littered with carcasses polluting and contaminating the environment.

The turkey vulture is not related to raptors (birds of prey) but is more closely related to the stork family. If you notice, their feet do not have sharp talons and actually look like chicken feet. They do not have the ability to strike and make a kill like eagles, falcons, hawks or owls. The only truly sharp object they possess is the tip of their beak, used to tear decaying flesh (or to bite a caring rehabber).

Often you may see them soaring in the sky alone or in groups (circling in groups is called "kettling", a term applied to hawks and vultures). It actually takes quite a bit of energy for them to take flight. They warm themselves in the morning by roosting in trees or on the roofs of barns or houses, holding their wings stretched out. It is also thought that they do this to help kill off some of the bacteria they may get on their feathers after eating carrion. Once they take flight, they search for a thermal pocket (a warm column of air) to give them lift so they can stay aloft without exerting the energy to flap. You will see hawks and eagles do this as well.

The turkey vulture is unique in that it has a very keen sense of smell. It can detect carrion from many miles away. In fact, the black vultures (a smaller vulture species) will often follow the turkey vultures in search of food relying on their greater sense of smell.

The only true defense mechanism these birds exhibit is to hiss and regurgitate in the presence of a threat, such as a predator (or human). They regurgitate to "lighten their load" in order to take quick flight and to distract the threatening creature. The enzymes and bacteria in their digestive system actually kill "bad" bacteria, fungi and viruses, leaving the regurgitated material much "cleaner" than when they ate it. This unfortunately gives them a natural unpleasant odor. Bald eagles share this same odor as they have similar digestive enzymes.

The turkey vulture is one of the numerous bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It is ILLEGAL to HARM, HARRASS, KILL or POSSESS any part of a turkey vulture, resulting in a hefty fine and possible imprisonment. Every year, the majority of turkey vultures brought to SCWC are shot or hit by cars. It is not easy for them to get away from vehicles quickly and much of their food is found on our roads and highways. We have had some kindhearted citizens bring in vultures after witnessing a driver swerve to hit it. They are often shot because they are roosting on a warm roof. A lot of their natural roosting sites have been lost to development so they have little choice but to share your trees and roofs as roosting spots. The only damage that may occur is a white wash of urates (bird urine) that will wash away with rain (or a hose). They may not continue to use the same roosting site all year, rather moving to alternate sites in different seasons. They will commonly roost on warm roofs in the winter.

Vultures primarily nest in crevasses, cliffs, thickets, hollow stumps or caves. Since there are so few caves around, they will occasionally use an abandoned building. They do not build much of a nest, if any, and lay one to two eggs directly on the bare surface. Both parents incubate the egg(s) and raise the young to about ten-weeks-old before they fledge. The young will remain with the family group until the fall. There is a group hierarchy and the young are usually the least dominant and must roost on lower branches (often getting their feathers covered in urates) and eat last. Over the years, I have learned a lot about these majestic creatures. I have cared for many that have suffered terrible injuries due to their misunderstood existence. They are actually quite gentle and patient. Some Native Americans refer to the turkey vulture as the “peace eagle”. As Nature’s cleaning crew, they help us by keeping our environment clean and never charge for their service. They are a pleasant sight, soaring free in the sky and have no real predators, except for humans. I hope this information will help you understand the true nature and value of this wonderful bird and you will consider the turkey vulture an animal not of carnage and death, but of necessity and peace.