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Turkey vulture

Cathartes (a Latinized form of the Greek word *kartharsis*, meaning “purifier,” referring to the scavenger’s biological role of cleaning up dead things)

aura (a Latinization of the native Mexican word for the bird, *auroura*)

BY LEE LAMB

Ask most people about turkey vultures (also known as buzzards) and they’ll likely describe the birds as ugly, repulsive, and downright creepy. Because of old Western movies and books, the word “vulture” or “buzzard” evokes images of winged scavengers circling high over a dying cowboy sprawled out in the desert, their beady eyes gleaming and beaks drooling. That’s certainly what went through my mind when I saw my first turkey vulture during a family trip. A high school student at the time, I had read plenty of Louis L’Amour novels and actually shuddered as we drove past the seemingly sinister beast perched on a roadside fence post.

Identification

It’s hard to mistake the turkey vulture for anything else except maybe a wild turkey, for which it is named (a gobbler also has a wrinkled, red, nearly featherless head). The vulture’s bald pate has an important purpose. It allows the scavenger to stay relatively clean even when feeding deeply in a dead animal’s carcass. Blood and other residue clinging to its head eventually bake off in the sun.

Montana native Lee Lamb lives in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

Turkey vultures weigh up to 6 pounds. Blackish-brown feathers cover the bird’s body, which measures 25 to 32 inches long. A turkey vulture’s yellow feet have surprisingly short talons, possibly explaining why this bird of prey prefers to feed on dead animals rather than hunt live ones.

Food

Turkey vultures in Montana primarily eat carrion—everything from roadkill to dead livestock to fish carcasses washed up on shorelines—though they’ll also consume maggots, worms, and other invertebrates while foraging on carcasses. Though repulsive, their eating habits make the world a little more sanitary for the rest of us.

Flight

While homely on the ground, the turkey vulture is lovely to look at in flight. Its long, broad wings stretch 6 feet from tip to tip, with dark gray flight feathers set against black wing linings. In flight the bird holds its wings in a shallow V, teetering from side to side to maintain stability and lift while riding warm air thermals. This allows the vulture to “float” in the air for hours at a time with only an occasional wing flap. A circling vulture

does not necessarily indicate a dead animal below. The bird may be gaining altitude or searching for food.

Behavior

A turkey vulture soars over large distances, using its sharp eyesight and highly developed sense of smell to locate food. If it finds a carcass before other scavengers arrive, and the hide is too thick for its beak to pierce, it waits for another animal to expose edible portions.

Soaring vultures watch each other; when one finds a carcass, others move to the site. The birds don’t like to share a meal, however, so newcomers usually wait their turn from a distance until an existing diner moves off. Vultures gorge themselves until their crops bulge. Then they sit sleepily while digesting the rotting meat. Powerful stomach acids kill bacteria and disease.

Nesting

A female turkey vulture lays two blotchy white eggs on a bare cliff ledge or the floor of a mammal burrow or small cave. Young are born covered in white down and with dark gray faces. Both parents care for the young, feeding them regurgitated food. The smell of vulture vomit is so repulsive it keeps predators away.

Range, Habitat, and Status

Turkey vultures are common from southern Canada south throughout the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America. Montana’s turkey vultures range statewide during summer, living in dry, open country including badlands, grasslands, farmlands, and open woodlands. In fall the birds migrate south for warmer climes.

Montana’s turkey vulture population appears healthy and stable. As long as other animals continue dying, these dark scavengers should continue to do just fine. 🐼

On June 13, 2011, Makoshika State Park near Glendive celebrates its 20th annual Buzzard Day, commemorating the return of turkey vultures to the park each spring. The event includes several running races, guided hikes, and a concert at the park’s outdoor amphitheater. For more information, call the park at (406) 377-6256.