

TURKEY VULTURE

Phylum: Chordata; Class: Aves; Order: Ciconiformes; Family: Cathartidae
Cathartes aura

Weight: 3-4 pounds **Length:** 25-32 inches **Wing Span:** 6 feet

Habitat: Very diverse, including open country, farmland, temperate and tropical forests and mountainous regions

Range: The Turkey Vulture is found in all the lower contiguous 48 states as well as southern parts of Central Canada and it can be found throughout Central and South America.

Status:

- Turkey vulture populations are considered stable and in need of no conservation efforts.
- In some areas a reduction of turkey vultures have occurred because of strict rules requiring officials to bury dead animals, a major food source for the turkey vulture.

Diet in the wild: Carrion (dead animals), predator of dying or sick animals and various forms of vegetation.

Special features:

- The turkey vulture's digestive system possesses the unique ability to kill any harmful bacteria and viruses in the decaying food it eats. In fact, its fecal matter and regurgitated pellets, boluses, do not carry diseases found in its food.
- Turkey vultures have a featherless head to help keep them clean and prevent diseases. Feathers would just act as a sponge soaking up all the bacteria and viruses. Without feathers, it also allows radiation from the sun to help kill any of these bacteria and viruses.
- Thermoregulation is the name of the game. Turkey vultures allow their body temperature to drop in the evenings. So, in order to prepare for flight the next morning they spread their wings in the sun to warm up. They can also get to hot. To battle over heating, turkey vultures will defecate on their legs. When the defecation evaporates, it cools them off. How conservation minded can an animal be!?!
- When it comes to defense, keep your distance. Vultures, like most other animals, will first try to leave the scene when threatened. However, if they can't get away and are in an extreme situation of stress, they can use a defense method referred to as projectile regurgitation. The turkey vulture can hit a target with fairly good accuracy at up to six feet away.
- If turkey vultures are not unusual enough, they also have an acute sense of smell used to find carrion. The unusual thing about this is that birds in general typically lack the sense of smell. Do you need proof? A retired Union Oil engineer reported the company using turkey vultures to help find gas pipeline leaks. Natural gas is odorless, so the company added the "rotten egg" smell to it by adding a particular chemical which is similar to the one let off from the carrion itself. Turkey vultures would hover around pipeline leaks because of the smell, thus leading engineers to some of the leaks.
- Turkey vultures are masters at flying. Many times they do not even have to flap their wings. They are known for catching thermals, pockets of rising hot air, and gliding for miles. While doing this, they can reach altitudes of 5000 feet.
- The feet of turkey vultures are weak. They do not have the strength like that of a hawk or eagle. The weak feet do not allow it to hunt and kill healthy adult animals.
- Vulture identification: In Kansas, we mainly have turkey vultures with a few stray black vultures in the south east corner of the state. While in flight, turkey vultures fly with a loose "V" shape made by them hanging their wings slightly behind their back. Turkey vultures also have white tips on the underside of their flight feathers. Sometimes, the white tips are not evident when flying at high altitudes. They also have a bald head, like other vulture species.
- Fact or fiction, you decide. Turkey vultures are said to sometimes develop attachments to humans. One story states that a turkey vulture became attached to a boy to the point it would follow him to the school bus every day then go in search of food while he was off to school. However, it would be back at the bus stop when he got out of school for the day.

Social organization & Behavior:

- Turkey Vultures live and work together, in cooperation and friendliness. They communicate with friends and neighbors when they find something to eat. They let the others know where the food is. And when there is a big feast they communicate with neighboring flocks in distant roosts.



- They enjoy playing games, too. Almost every evening when they return to the roost there will be about half an hour of follow-the-leader, tag, and speed soaring, if the winds are favorable.
- Some roosts are known to be 100 years or more old. That is, the same family of vultures has used the same tree or trees for home for many generations. They may move for the season (for some unknown reason) to a different tree in the immediate neighborhood. The following year they may adopt the new tree, or they may decide to go back to the original tree.
- Individual birds will live in the same communal roost most of their life, and will usually sleep in the same roost in the same tree on their selected branch every night. However, some vultures may wander up to 200 miles away, visiting different roosts each night, and then return to their home roost a week or two later.
- In a roost the birds have a pecking order and use body language and eye contact in a manner which is clearly comprehensible to people who have learned to observe them.
- Many of the roosts are located near human habitation. There can be the same kind of trees a half mile away in a field, but for their home the birds will pick a tree near people. They seem to like the warmth of human company.

Breeding & Care of Young:

- The Turkey Vulture is family oriented. A roost is a group of vultures living together and sleeping at night in a tall tree. This is different from a nest where a mating pair will go off by themselves and lay two eggs and raise their young. Vultures do not build nests as such, but simply lay two eggs on the bare ground. Nests are located on a rock ledge on the face of a cliff, in a cave, a hollow tree, or even in an abandoned shed or barn.
- The Turkey Vulture is a very clean bird. Lengthy observations of the vultures in a roost have indicated that each bird spends from two to three hours a day preening itself. Also, they will bathe in water whenever possible. Entire flocks of 75 birds and babies have been observed going into a pond of water for bathing purposes. They preen their feathers, submerge, shake, and scrub for half an hour. Then they walk up on the bank spread their wings out so the sun can dry them. When the time is right, they soar off into the sky and play an exuberant game of tag, because, it seems, they feel so good.

References:

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