

Local Bird Profiles: Turkey vulture

By Larry Hyslop



A turkey vulture holding open its wings to gather warmth from the morning sun, photo from the USFWS.

It is not easy to like a turkey vulture. The more obvious reason is their red, wrinkled and featherless head. It supplied their name since it reminded people of a turkey's head. Turkey vultures are scavengers that feed by thrusting their head into the body of a dead animal to rip off a bite of decaying meat. Feathers would too easily become fouled by such feeding. Their beaks are strong enough to rip open a cow hide to gain access to the dead flesh.

Add to this their unusual habit of defecating on their feet during hot days to help cool off. About their only means of defense, which seems to work fine, is to vomit on their attacker. In the morning, they are often seen holding their wings outward as in the above photo. This dries dew from the wings and warms them up.

Their scientific name is "*Cathartes aura*", Latin for cleansing breath, since they cleanse the landscape. As a scavenger, they must be able to find dead animals. They are very efficient at soaring and can cover large distances with hardly any expenditure of energy. They hold their wings in a slight upward-V and rock easily in a breeze.

Much discussion centers on their ability to smell this rotting meat. They have the largest olfactory system of any bird and seem to be able to detect death on the ground even though soaring over a forested area. Scientists remain unsure, however, on their ability to smell potential food, compared to spotting it. They will not eat rotting meat but prefer fresh kills.

As turkey vultures migrate, they often roost together at night. Such a group is called a Wake since they seem to be in mourning as they hang their heads in sleep. Here in Elko, I have heard questions of why they like to roost over the city cemetery. People have even expressed an idea that maybe they can smell death there. They probably like roosting over the cemetery since it offers large, mature trees for roosting. They also spend the night above people's houses in the Tree Streets area, but the cemetery is quiet, with little human activity to disturb their slumbers. They remember this good roosting spot and return to it year after year, since they usually live 20 years.

They are one of the few birds that do well among the growing human population. We offer them food like road kills, dead ground squirrels and livestock. Their relatives are the black vulture of the

desert southwest and the California condor, which is only now returning to areas where turkey vultures have reigned supreme for decades. They are not really buzzards, which is the name used in Europe for some types of hawks.

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