

## Turkey Vulture

*Cathartes aura*



Bald is beautiful, for Turkey Vultures. But pretty? Probably not.

While pretty focuses solely on outer physical appearance, beauty is as much how a thing lives as how a thing looks.

A Turkey Vulture is a beautiful bird. It is a timid, patient, non-confrontational creature with amazing talents: the best sense of smell of the New World vultures, excellent eyesight, and one of the most skilled and graceful gliders of all North American birds.

Contrary to myth, the Turkey Vulture does not eat live animals. And contrary to another popular belief, it does not feed strictly on carrion. It enjoys plant matter including shoreline vegetation, pumpkin, and bits of other crops.

A Turkey Vulture, called a TV by birders, won't eat just anything. It prefers fairly fresh meat and usually bypasses rotten meat. It prefers the meat of herbivorous animals, avoiding that of dogs and other carnivores. In fact, all scavengers and predatory animals, including people, prefer to feed on herbivorous animals, which are tastier.

In short, a TV prefers to avoid carcasses of cats, dogs, and coyotes unless those are the only available food. And if there's a lack of carrion, it can go many days without eating because of its extreme energy efficiency in the air.

A Turkey Vulture soars above the ground for most of the day searching for food with its excellent eyesight and highly developed sense of smell. It is often along roadsides cleaning up roadkill, or near rivers feasting on washed-up fish, another favorite food.

The Turkey Vulture first finds food using its incredible sense of smell. It is attracted to the scent of mercaptan, the gas produced by the beginnings of decay. So fine-tuned is the sense of smell that when a piping company was trying to find a leak in a gas line, it pumped mercaptan through the lines and within minutes, Turkey Vultures began to circle over the leaking section, 40 miles away.

Once at a food site, the vulture's bald head becomes an advantage. When a vulture eats carrion, it must often stick

its head inside the carcass to reach meat. A feathered head would pick up unwanted pieces of the meal with all of the accompanying bacteria. A bald head picks up very little. After eating, the TV perches in the heat of the sun where whatever may still cling to the fuzz on the head is baked off.

Another unique adaptation kills harmful bacteria. The digestive acids in a TV's stomach are so strong that they kill virtually all bacteria and viruses they encounter. There is even evidence to support the claim that TVs can consume meat infected with anthrax and their digestive system destroys that virus.

Those digestive acids make TV uric acid so strong that it, too, kills bacteria. So because of the nature of the digestive system, vulture poop is a very good sanitizer. After stepping in a carcass, a TV will often expel its waste, which is fluid, onto its legs. The uric acid kills any bacteria that may have been picked up from the dead animal.

In the air, a Turkey Vulture is equally amazing. It waits until the sun has warmed the morning air before launching itself from its nighttime perch into the rising air and breezes. Vultures

tend to roost in dead or open trees where there are no small branches and leaves to get in the way or to interrupt updrafts. Once airborne, the TV circles upward searching for a thermal.

When it rises to the top of a thermal, it may ride upper air currents, or it may dive across the sky at speeds up to 60 miles per hour, losing altitude until it reaches another thermal, where it rises again. This is done without the need for a single wing flap, enabling it to glide for hours at high altitudes.

A TV maintains stability and lift at low altitudes by holding its wings up in a slight dihedral (V-shape) and teetering from side to side to take advantage of every possible trace of wind and updraft. Its six foot wingspan and wing feathers are specially adapted to give it tremendous buoyancy in the air. However, the necessary flaps at takeoffs from the ground are quite laborious, so TVs often fall victim to predators and cars.

Male and female Turkey Vultures are identical in color and do not differ significantly in size or weight.

They raise only one brood a year. The "nest" is a small scratched indentation in the ground and may be in caves, hollowed logs, or even on the floors of abandoned barns and sheds.

Two blotchy eggs incubate for about 40 days and both parents share the incubating and caring for the brood. Young fledge 70 to 80 days after hatching, at which time they have darker heads and beaks and at a distance may be confused with Black Vultures.

### TV Trivia

Its Latin name, *Cathartes aura*, comes from the Greek *kathartes*, "cleanser, purifier," and from *aurum*, "gold."

A group of vultures is called a "Venue." Vultures circling in the air are a "Kettle."

Turkey vultures have very few vocalization capabilities: hisses (when they feel threatened) and grunts (from hungry young, and from adults in courtship).