

Turkey Vultures Just Have a Bad Rap

By Judy Fleagle

As a sometimes birdwatcher, I was looking out my bedroom window the other day and saw a Turkey Vulture land on a hefty Alder branch. Then a second arrived and perched next to the first. Then a third arrived. But when the last one landed, the branch broke! I heard the crack and saw the truly hysterical sight of three surprised Turkey Vultures, flapping frantically away from that branch.

I so wished I had my iPhone and had videoed the scene.

Besides watching Turkey Vultures, I actually met one once. His name was Jerry, and he allowed me to get up close and personal. I met him at Dan Duel's Free Flight Bird and Marine Mammal Rehabilitation center in Bandon, Oregon, where I also met Vic, a blind Screech Owl; Murdock, a hybrid mix (part Gyrfalcon and part Prairie Falcon); Babes, a Red-tailed Hawk; and A Shau, an immature Bald Eagle. For various reasons, none of these birds could be returned to the wild. Of these permanent residents, Jerry was everyone's favorite because he was so easy going.

Ten years before, Jerry had been brought in with his nest mate by loggers, when they were the size of pigeons. The other bird was able to be released to the wild when ready, but Jerry could not. His wing had been crushed, and he could never fly. He was the only bird Dan let me get close to; the others, all predators, were considered too dangerous. Jerry, who was not a predator, acted very cool as he checked out my hands and let me touch him.

Jerry, despite being an ugly bird with repulsive traits, was very popular at Free Flight, and it got me to wondering why. It must be because the folks there had become familiar with him. Hmm! Perhaps more of us would change our minds about Turkey Vultures if we, too, became more familiar with them or at least, knew more about them.

I know that being up close with a Turkey Vulture that one time made me want to know more. Then life intervened, and that quest was put on hold . . . until I saw those three Turkey Vultures all trying to sit on the same branch. That incident got me thinking about these large birds, and once again, I was motivated to learn more. This time I did the research. I learned that Turkey Vultures are fabulous flyers, are brown—

not black, and are primarily scavengers—not predators. They also have some positive traits, including being beneficial to mankind. Read on!

Easy to Spot in the Sky

Where I live on the Oregon Coast, when we see a large bird soaring high in the sky, it is either an Osprey, a Turkey Vulture, or a Bald Eagle. Even if you see only the silhouette, you can tell by the shape of their wings which is which. The Osprey wings have the bent-wing shape like a gull. The Turkey Vulture wings have a rounded shape, and they are held higher than the rest of their body. And the Bald Eagle holds its wings out very flat. The Bald Eagle is the largest, then the Turkey Vulture, and last the Osprey. And Turkey Vultures are the most commonly seen.

Sometimes, I see a single Turkey Vulture soaring high overhead, but usually I see two or three. And often there are six to eight or even more circling at lower altitudes. Because they are so large, it takes a lot of energy to flap their wings.

Finding thermals and gliding saves energy. When there are no thermals at lower altitudes, they may appear to be teetering, but they are just stabilizing. When there are several birds circling, there will most likely be something dead below.

Scavengers, Not Predators

As scavengers, Turkey Vultures, *cathartes aura*, feed on dead organisms. And they have a great sense of smell, enabling them to smell the dead from a great distance. They are well suited to eating carrion, which is why they have featherless heads. It sounds totally gross, but they can poke their featherless heads into a carcass without feathers getting all gooped up. Makes sense! That way, it's easier to clean up after a meal.

Here are a couple of facts—totally gross but true. Turkey Vulture chicks, like most baby birds, are fed the regurgitated results of what their parents have eaten. Which means, in this case, they are fed an exclusive diet of regurgitated carrion. (Oh yum!!!) And nesting Turkey Vultures have an interesting, albeit disgusting, way of discouraging potential predators. They vomit on them. What's more, in upchucking, they can hurl their putrid vomit up to 10 feet! Isn't that a great visual? And my research revealed that the acid in their vomit is as strong as battery acid and 100 times stronger than our stomach acid. Wow! You're not going to catch me harassing any Turkey Vultures.

They are not like most raptors. Their beaks and feet lack the power and design for killing or carrying off critters, which means they don't eat livestock or people's pets. So, if you see them circling near your home or farm, you don't have to worry about your animals.

Many predators kill their prey and then eat it or as much as they want and leave or bury the remains. Then other animals, considered secondary predators, take their turns.

Most secondary predators also can kill. But some birds don't have that ability, yet their diet is primarily freshly killed animals. That's why these birds are ever searching from on high and have such a good sense of smell. And when they do find a dead critter, they zero in and move fast. If they don't, other predators may get there ahead of them.

These large, non-predatory birds, often listed as birds of prey, actually fill the role of scavenger. They include the California Condor, whose population is still quite low; the Black Vulture, mainly seen in Eastern states; and the Turkey Vulture, seen in most of the U.S. and southern Canada.

Turkey Vultures circle in a group of seven, eight, or more when they sense carrion below. This circling group is called a "kettle." If I was a predator, I might get out of the way when a kettle of Turkey Vultures descended on my kill. Once they are on the ground and no longer circling, they become a "committee." But when they start feeding, they are known as a "wake." Good grief! Who makes up these names!

Their Positive Traits

When they land, the wake commonly shares their find. Sharing is a positive trait, and they share carrion with each other and with other birds as well, such as eagles, hawks, and ravens. Although carrion is their primary food source, when they can't find it, they have been known to eat snails, grasshoppers, shrimp, turtles, snakes, and even cow manure and rotten pumpkins. But they prefer their food already dead.

Not only do they share food, Turkey Vultures are also generally social and will roost together in the evenings and gather in large groups before migrating. Although, in more southerly states they don't migrate, most of the birds live farther north, and they do.

Where I live, they are gone by mid-October and return in mid-March. Once near Morro Bay, California, I saw a huge swirl of Turkey Vultures, resembling a tornado. They had arrived at a resting place for the night during their migration. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of them in that single swirl. I was mesmerized.

And Turkey Vultures benefit all of us. Here's how. Think of them as janitors. 1) They help keep the environment free of the remains left by other predators. 2) They help prevent land and water from being contaminated by the carcasses of weakened and sick animals. 3) And they help prevent the arrival of disease-transmitting insects that would otherwise be attracted to the carcasses. So, let's hear it for these much-maligned birds!

Now, when you see Turkey Vultures gliding on the thermals or circling above, you can share my joy in knowing that they are truly beneficial! That they are among the good guys! That they just have a bad rap!

***Note:** There are many sources about Turkey Vultures on the Internet, but Hawk Mountain, Global Raptor Conservation is the one I found to have the most information that was easily accessible and easy to understand at <https://www.hawkmountain.org/raptors/turkey-vulture>.*

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