



TURKEY VULTURE

Falconiformes
Family: Cathartidae
Genus: *Cathartes*
Species: *aura*



Range: Southern Canada to the rest of North and South America. Non-migratory in California and Southern US.

Habitat: Grasslands, forests and deserts.

Niche: Carnivore, diurnal, arboreal

Wild diet: Carrion, mostly from medium to larger sized mammals.

Zoo diet:

Life Span: (Wild) 10 - 15 years
(Captivity) over 30 years

Sexual dimorphism: none

Location in SF Zoo: Hawk Hill at the Koret Animal Resource Center in the Children's Zoo

APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

A turkey vulture has a bald featherless, purplish-red head and neck, a short, hooked, ivory-colored beak and dark brown to black feathers with white or grey wing-pits. They are a large bird with long, broad wings with a wingspan of 6 feet. The legs are dark to pinkish and the tail is relatively long. Juveniles have a dark head and dark bill with a pale base.

In flight, the undersides of the wings are two-toned: on the leading edge of the wing the color appears black or dark brown, and the trailing edge appears silver or whitish. They have long "fingers" at their wingtips and long tails that extend past their toe tips in flight. When soaring, Turkey Vultures hold their wings slightly raised, making a 'V' when seen head-on. As they fly, they tip from side to side, soaring on thermal updrafts. They can fly for hours without flapping their wings.

Weight: 3 - 4 lbs

Length: 25 – 29 inches

Wingspan: 6 ft

To find their food, turkey vulture's have keen eyesight along with a well developed olfactory system. They are attracted to the smell of mercaptan, a gas given off by decaying animals. This enables this species to locate concealed carcasses beneath a forest canopy.

STATUS & CONSERVATION

Tolerant of human activity and adaptable in its diet and choice of nest sites, this species has fared well in our changing landscapes; its populations are generally stable or increasing. They are the most common vulture in the New World and are not currently threatened in the wild.

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COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

Gregarious. Most vocalizations are grunts, hisses, and barking sounds, used mainly for predator deterrence.

Turkey vultures usually roost in large community groups, but search for food independently during daylight hours.

COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

To start the mating ritual, several birds gather on the ground and begin hopping around in a circle with wings partially spread. In flight a bird might closely follow a potential mate while continuing a ritual of flapping and diving. This species nests in dark recesses beneath boulders, on cliff ledges, in hollow trees, logs, and stumps, and in abandoned buildings. Little or no nest is actually built in these sites. Their eggs are laid on debris or the flat bottom of the nest site. Eggs are off-white and marked with brown and lavender. Incubation time is about 30 to 40 days. Both parents share the responsibilities of incubating and caring for the brood. Unlike most birds of prey, the chicks are fed regurgitated food, not fresh pieces of meat.

Incubation: 30 – 40 days # of Eggs: 1 - 3	Sexual Maturity: Fledging: 70 -80 days
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MISCELLANEOUS

Adult vultures have a few natural predators and when threatened will vomit up foul smelling stomach acids which can sting the eyes and face of an animal looking for an easy meal from a turkey vulture nest.

They obtain most of the water they need from carrion moisture and their kidneys allow them to excrete less water. They are also protected from diseases associated with decaying animals by a sophisticated immune system.

New World vultures have a habit of urinating down their legs to cool their bodies down by evaporative cooling.

Sources:

National Geographic Complete birds of North America © 2006, p 126-127

Nature Trail Handbook

Handbook of Birds of the World Vol 1 © 1992 Lynx Edicions

<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/>

<http://www.peregrinefund.org/>

<http://vulturesociety.homestead.com/>

<http://www.desertusa.com/>

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