



STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)



Identifying Marks: Wingspan 68 inches; length 28 inches. This large scavenger is named for its turkey-like pink head and black feathers. A turkey vulture is large enough to be confused with a bald eagle. Unlike an eagle, a soaring turkey vulture holds its wings in a shallow 'V,' called a dihedral. From underneath, rear part of wings appear gray or pale silver.

Habitat: In eastern U.S., turkey vultures prefer forests or forests mixed with farmland.

Nest: Likes dark corners and crannies in hollow trees and logs, caves, abandoned buildings and under boulders.

Diet: Feeds on dead animals ranging in size from tadpoles to deer.

Voice: Lacking a bird's "voice box," called a *syrinx*, vultures are limited to guttural hisses, chuffs, and grunts.

Comments: Traditionally, vultures were grouped with hawks and falcons based on their hooked beaks and similar feeding habits. Today, due to behavioral and genetic studies, their relationship to storks (keep reading) has been accepted.

Up Close and Very Personal

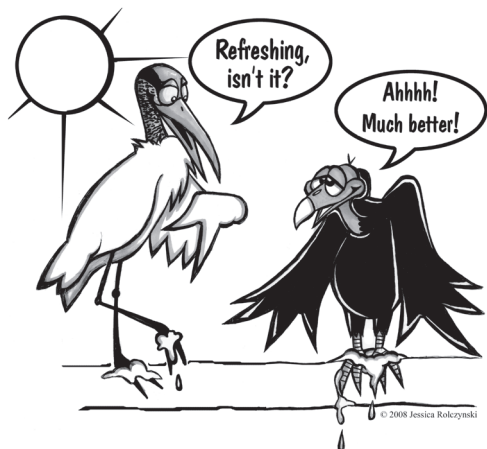
Receding Feathers

The vulture's red-skinned head is an example of form following function. When you dine on decomposing bodies, your head is often covered with bacteria-laden slime. Since ultra-violet light from the sun kills bacteria, a bare head is easier for the light to clean. Also, vultures are amazingly resistant to most diseases found in carrion such as botulism and salmonella.



Photo by Vic Berardi.

Note the shallow 'V' profile of this soaring turkey vulture.



Feces Footnotes

In birds, feces and urine are combined and voided through a single opening or cloaca. Remember, birds don't sweat. On an extremely hot day, guess what a turkey vulture can do to cool off? The bird directs the cloaca downward and forward to defecate on its bare legs or feet. Just as with sweat, the liquid feces evaporates and the vulture is made cooler. The scientific term for this behavior is *urohidrosis*. Storks, the vulture's relatives, also excrete on themselves to cool down.

Dinner Smells

It should not come as a surprise that turkey vultures have a great sense of smell. Even with their excellent eyesight, soaring vultures aren't going to be able to spot a dead raccoon under a stand of trees but they will smell it. To be precise, the vulture-attracting gas emitted by carrion is ethyl mercaptan. When looking for leaks, natural gas companies have learned to introduce this odorant into pipelines. Then, all they have to do is keep an eye out for circling vultures.