
New World Turkey Vultures

by: Penelope Cox

SOARING BEAUTIFULLY OVER THE DESERT FOOTHILLS

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Cathartidae Family

Carrion Feeders

My first encounter with Turkey Vultures was at my upper pool beside a dead ironwood tree. Two couples visited regularly in early summer. Although I had seen them in earlier years perching in the trees at Rancho Mañana, until the last three years they had never come to my present location high up on a hill north of Schoolhouse Road. In spite of their ugly features, I have a certain fascination for them as I can watch them close at hand with action around the pool.

The Turkey Vulture has a wide range, all the way down to South America from as far north as southern Canada. I have seen them in Mexico.

They are carrion feeders, waiting for a dead animal to rot to a stage when their weaker bills and feet can tear it apart. Locating these carcasses is not only by



sight but also by smell, as the turkey vulture has the largest olfactory system of all birds, which accounts for the large hole in their beaks.



Photo & range map courtesy Wikipedia

On the ground they appear to be awkward and unstable, but so graceful in the air where their aerial displays consist of soaring and wheeling, quite often a courtship maneuver. In flight the wings tip up slightly in a V-shape. I have watched with fascination their approach and landing at my pool – wheeling in and around the saguaros, letting down their “landing gear” just in time to land with a thump!

My ironwood tree became their natural perch and when I observed one approaching another with wings flapping I had thought it was a possessive thing, but in fact it was a courtship approach.

Statistics: Carrion feeders are related to condors. Turkey Vultures have the distinguishing marks of a red head, yellow feet, two-toned blackish wings with lighter flight feathers, and a wingspread of six feet. They nest – no formal nest, per se, but deposit eggs - in a cavity amongst rocks or in cliffs or even in logs, if available, and lay one to three blotched, brown and white eggs. Their voices are mostly silent, but they can hiss or groan if disturbed.

Their migration period is usually around October and they come back in March/ April. So join me next March to watch for them. Like the swallows returning to Capistrano, so the Turkey Vultures will be seen soaring beautifully on their return to Cave Creek.

