
Turkey Vultures Return for Summer

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TURKEY VULTURES DO THEIR SHARE TO KEEP THE WORLD CLEAN

As the days grow longer and the nights continue to be more mild, there are many signs of spring. Some birds that have been winter residents leave for cooler climates, and other species return to the desert. When the curve-billed thrasher starts his daily serenades, we can look for the brown headed and bronzed cowbirds, white-winged doves, elf owls, black-chinned hummingbirds, western kingbirds, orioles and most great-tailed grackles.

The turkey vulture, after wintering in Mexico, begins to appear in the skies over Arizona in March and early April.



The turkey vulture is the most common variety in Arizona. They are sometimes referred to as “buzzards,” but this is not their proper name. They are called turkey vultures because when the early American colonists saw them they mistakenly thought them to be wild turkeys.

Turkey vultures are large, black, broad-winged birds with naked red heads. Their wingspan can reach up to five and a half feet. They can be seen soaring high above our desert floor in huge lazy circles. Their dark wings are in a noticeable shallow V, with lighter colored feathers on the underside.

As they circle, their bodies tip from side to side, and hardly a flap is needed as they ride the warm air currents, called thermals. The long primary feathers at the wing tip stabilize the birds, allowing them to soar for great lengths of time.



Their Latin name is *Cathartes¹ aura²* meaning “breeze scavenger.” It is indeed a perfect name for these birds.

Female vultures lay one to three white or grayish-green eggs in such places as caves, hollow trees, deserted buildings or on the ground. Little time is spent



A side view, showing the perforated nostrils.
The Turkey Vulture forages by smell, an ability that is uncommon in the avian world.
[\[Wikipedia\]](#)

constructing a nest. The incubation time is about 58 days and the eggs are cared for by both parents.

Their diets consist mainly of dead and rotting flesh. They provide humans a valuable service by keeping the countryside cleaned up. Their sense of sight is very keen, allowing them to spot food from great altitudes. They can also detect food with their highly developed olfactory systems. In fact, turkey vultures are the only vultures in the world, other than king vultures in South America, that have a developed sense of smell. They can be seen singly or in groups circling above a meal. They are not territorial, and their powerful wings can take them for miles searching for their next meal.

As is so often the case when man becomes involved in nature, vultures became victims when in South America farmers feared the birds might spread disease because they ate carrion. Thousands of these birds were slaughtered. However, all tests done by researchers show that germs causing disease are killed in the vultures’ digestive systems.

So, in an ever more crowded world where we must be concerned with our environment, turkey vultures are doing their share to help us keep it clean. As they soar overhead in wide, graceful circles, watch for them. They are beautiful!

¹ Latin: “purifier”

² Latinized from the Native Mexican word for the bird, *auroura*

