

NATURE DETECTIVES

Summer 2011



Summertime Turkey Vultures

“Look,” Sam called, pointing at a large brownish black bird circling in the summer sky. “Do you think it’s an eagle? Why does it have such a little head?”

“Well, the head looks small because there are no feathers on that bird’s head,” Sam’s grandma answered. “It has big wings like an eagle, but it’s a turkey vulture. Turkey vulture heads are mostly bare wrinkly skin with a bit of dark fuzz. The adult birds have red heads, but it can be hard to see the red up in the sky.”

“Weird,” Sam snorted. “That one can’t be very old because I think it just learned how to fly. It keeps tipping back and forth. Maybe it is still figuring out how its wings work.”

Grandma smiled. “Actually, that turkey vulture is tilting back and forth to catch the warm breezes blowing up the hillside. Turkey vultures glide on rising warm air currents. See how the vulture is holding its wings in a wide v-shape. Slight adjustments of their wings and wingtip feathers look clumsy, but that’s how the vultures control the way air moves over their wings as they maneuver in the updrafts. Vultures soar for hours, circling up one updraft then diving at nearly 60 miles per hour into another rising air current. Unless they are taking off or landing, they rarely have to flap their wings.

“The vultures are back now from wintering much farther south. I’m really glad we have turkey vultures to clean up around here every summer, but if you want to know more about them, you can’t be squeamish,” Grandma added.

Sam grinned. “Grandma, I love gross stuff.”

Inside Information

Turkey vultures are expert fliers, but lots of other things about turkey vultures are just plain disgusting. If reading about vomit and poop and putrid dead stuff doesn’t gross you out, turn the page for more TV (turkey vulture) facts.





Riding the Updrafts and Circling for Food

Turkey vultures stir as a new day begins. They've spent the night hunched on cliffs or in tall trees near other turkey vultures. As the air begins to warm in the sunshine, the vultures stretch and groom their feathers. They preen until warm air currents begin to rise away from the land. One by one, they awkwardly flap off from their roosting perch, catch an updraft and begin to circle over grasslands, farms and foothills. They fly alone trying to pick up the scent or sight of something putrid and therefore good to eat. They watch other TVs in the area to see if any act like they are homing in on something suitably dead and tasty. They eagerly follow other scavengers to found food.



Few birds have a keen sense of smell, but the ability to smell dead stuff from a long way away is one of the major ways vultures find their food. They also have very good eyesight.



Vultures almost never eat anything alive. They do not have powerful feet or beaks built for killing. They eat most any animal that has died (**carrion**). Small animals are preferred carrion because larger animals often have hides too tough to be ripped open by the vultures' big hooked beaks. If a dead deer or cow is spotted, a few vultures might circle, waiting for a coyote to come along to open the carcass.

Anything Rotten is on the Menu

Turkey vulture bodies are perfect for their carrion eating habits. No worries about slime on head feathers as they dig beaks deep into gooey guts. Anything sticking to the bare wrinkled skin on their heads will be baked off by the sun.

Animals die from many causes including predators and accidents and disease. Vultures' tough digestive systems kill any disease organisms so it doesn't matter if the animal was sick when it died. In fact, as the clean-up crew, they help keep diseases from spreading. Vultures ensure that stinky bodies don't start piling up.

TVs sometimes eat grass and seeds, but they also gulp gloppy grass right out of a dead cow's intestines. Other choice vegetables include things like pumpkins left to rot in the field. They will eat cow pies and coyote scat, too. Lck.

The Dangerous Life of a Roadkill Diet

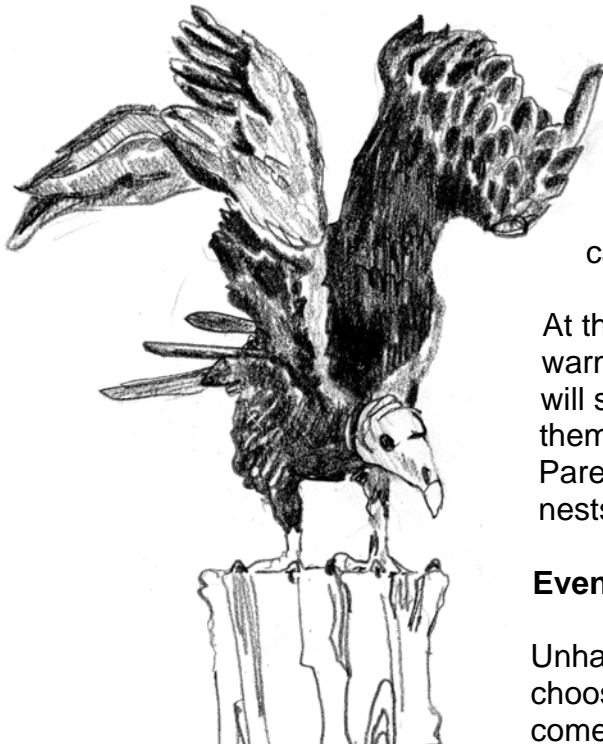
Vultures usually eat their food where they find it, and since the invention of the automobile, they find a lot of dead animals killed by cars. When the carrion is on the road, vultures often become roadkill themselves. Taking flight can be too slow and awkward to avoid a speeding car.

But if a predator appears, TVs will puke up an old bite of food that the hunter might eat while the vulture hops, hisses and flaps away. Or, a grossed out predator may decide to seek a more appetizing meal.



Beating the Heat

As days heat up, turkey vultures' featherless heads help them cool down. When that isn't enough cooling, they poop on their own legs. The evaporating liquid poop brings cool relief in the heat. Their poop is disease-free, but still...ee-ew.



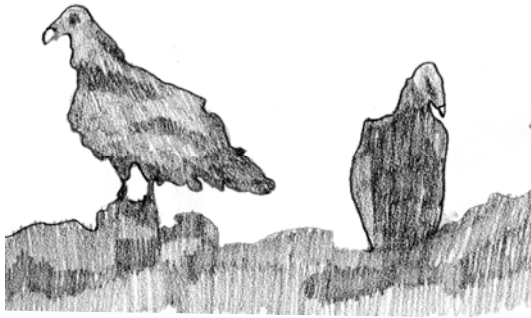
The vultures' gliding flight doesn't require a lot of energy so they don't need to spend hours eating. A lot of their time is spent preening their feathers. They are related to storks so they like water and will sometimes spend a half hour bathing in a pond. They hold their wings up to catch a shower in rainstorms, too.

At the end of the day or earlier if cool rain stops the warm updrafts, vultures fly back to their roosts. They will stay there until rising air currents make it easy for them to circle aloft the next day. Parents with eggs or hatchlings to tend will be at their nests rather than in the group roosts.

Even Baby TVs are Gross

Unhappy nesting anywhere near people, vultures choose a wild nest site and will stay away if humans come near. The nests are often hidden in crevices or caves, and the eggs are laid on the ground. The parent vultures don't bother bringing in nest-building materials. At feeding time, parent birds upchuck remnants of their meals that the babies eagerly consume from their parents' beaks.

TV babies aren't fond of visitors. Even young nestlings can stomp their feet and will vomit on any animals that approach them. That can't make them very appetizing prey, but some chicks are still eaten by raccoons, snakes or other non-finicky predators.



Turkey Vulture Word Fun

Do you know your vulture facts? The number of letters is indicated by the blanks. What do the letters in the circled blanks spell?

1. Shape of turkey vulture wings in flight. ○

2. Rising current of warm air. ○ _ _ _ _ _

3. Where vultures poop on a hot day. ○ _ _ _ _

4. What baby vultures do in self-defense. _ _ _ _ _ ○

5. Direction warm air goes. ○ _

6. Any dead animal. _ _ _ _ _ ○ _ _ _ _ _

7. Where vultures often nest. _ _ _ _ _ ○ _

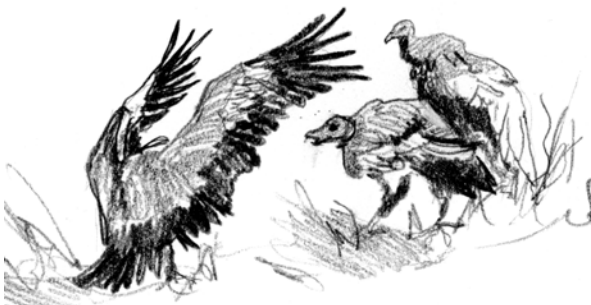


Artful Reading

Vultures make their way into many alphabet books. They are an easy pick for the “V” page, but brave is the author who chooses vultures as the topic for a whole picture book. *Vulture View* by April Pulley Sayre, illustrated by Steve Jenkins is a delightful exception. Steve Jenkins’ artwork accents the breezy text deftly summing up the turkey vulture’s world. Further facts, printed in the back, extend the text for curious nature detectives.

One More Foul Fact

Like owls, turkey vultures hack up pellets of indigestible food. Sometimes they will reach into their beaks with a foot to remove a coughed-up pellet. Yuck.



Answers to TV Word Fun (in random order):
cave, vomit, V, up, carrion, updraft, legs