

Turkey Vulture



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Ciconiiformes
Family: Cathartidae
Genus: *Cathartes*
Species: *aura*

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** *Cathartes aura* is found in the Western Hemisphere from southern Canada to Cape Horn. It prefers deciduous forests, farmlands, or other open areas. It is a permanent resident of the southern United States, but northern birds may migrate as far south as South America.
- **Exhibit Location:** Check for current location

Characteristics

- Length: 25 inches; Wingspan: 6 feet; Weight: approx. 6 pounds
- Their most unique characteristic is a small, almost bald, red head and neck. The head and neck have a thin layer of down (soft, fine feathers). When it eats carrion, it must often stick its head into the carcass to reach the meat. A feathery head would capture unwanted pieces of food as well as bacteria.
- Its feathers are dark brown, appearing rather black. The lower halves of the wings are silvery white. The feet are weak and are used for walking, running, and stepping on prey rather than grasping prey. The beak is small and light in color. Females are slightly larger than males.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 16 years, 10 months (banded individual); **In Captivity:** record is 33 years

Behaviors

- Turkey vultures are gentle and non-aggressive but elusive birds, with little known about their general behavior and social organization. They commonly roost in large community groups, but forage independently during the day.
- In flight, turkey vultures hold their wings in a V-(dihedral) shape and can fly for hours at high altitudes without flapping their wings by taking advantage of rising thermals. Their takeoffs can be quite arduous, sometimes causing birds to fall victim to predators or cars.
- The turkey vulture often defecates onto its legs using the evaporation of the water in the feces and/or urine to cool itself down. Because the excreta has a high uric acid content due to the nature of their diets, it also acts as a sanitizer and kills any bacteria the bird picks up while stepping on its food.
- It locates food while soaring over open areas and using its sense of smell to locate carrion. It will often fly low to the ground to pick up the scent of the gases of decaying animals. Turkey vultures can be found along roads cleaning up road kill, or near rivers eating washed-up fish.
- These birds have no vocal organ and can only utter hisses and grunts. They hiss when threatened and grunts are commonly heard by hungry young or adults in courtship.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** pumpkins, squash, training

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at 3-4 years of age.
- Turkey vultures lay their eggs in warmer weather, in a protected location on the ground, in caves, crevices, hollow logs, under fallen trees or in abandoned buildings.
- Their primary form of defense of their nesting site is vomiting. They do not projectile vomit but cough up a lump of semi-digested and foul-smelling meat that deters most creatures from attacking their nest.
- Females lay 2 eggs that are cream-colored with brown spots. Both parents incubate the eggs.
- The young hatch in about 40 days. The adults regurgitate food and care for them for 10-11 weeks. The young fledge at about 9-10 weeks.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** carrion, shoreline vegetation, pumpkin, bits of other crops, live insects.
- **At the Zoo:** rats & rabbits
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Conservation Status

- **IUCN Status:** Least Concern **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- In the United States, this species receives special legal protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, and its populations have been increasing over the last few decades.
- **Predators:** humans, birds of prey, large mammals

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- They are called turkey vultures because their featherless red head gives them the appearance of a turkey.
- A group of vultures is called a “Venue.” Vultures circling in the air are called a “Kettle.”
- Turkey vultures have excellent eyesight but poor vision in the dark and are one of the only birds in North America with a sense of smell.
- By eating carrion, they remove infected carcasses from the environment before they pose a threat of disease to other animals or humans.
- Turkey vultures are often seen standing in a spread-winged stance. This is called the “horaltic pose.” The stance is believed to serve multiple functions: drying the wings, warming the body, and baking off bacteria.
- Contrary to popular belief, American vultures are not known to circle a dying animal.

Sources:

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