

The Turkey Vulture and Other Large Birds

by Sally Cureton

I want to talk this month about a bird those of us who live in Massanutten Village see almost every day - the **Turkey Vulture**. They circle by the dozens just inside the gate and perch on the trees and are known to some as the "Massanutten eagles." Although they have been generally considered to be birds of prey, it has recently been determined that they are actually more closely related to storks than to hawks and eagles. Sometimes mistakenly called buzzards, they seldom kill their own food and are primarily scavengers, feeding on dead animals. As such they serve an important function as part of nature's cleanup crew.

Master soarers with a distinctive flight - they tilt slightly with their wings held in a shallow "V" making them easy to identify. Often they soar on thermals and updrafts, swaying and rocking from side to side. They can attain incredible heights, up to several miles in the air and their long, broad wings allow for many hours of effortless soaring. If you look closely on the underwing, there are silver flight feathers which contrast with the black coverts on the leading edge of the wing. These are big birds, approximately two feet tall with wingspans of up to six feet.

Their red heads are featherless to allow them to feed neatly on carrion. Because they are equipped with specialized enzymes and bacteria that allow them to eat contaminated meat, they can feed on any dead animal, large or small. Their excellent eyesight and incredible sense of smell, enable them to locate a meal from over half a mile away. They have a large appetite. One of these birds can eat up to 20% of its body weight in one sitting. Since meat is such a rich source of nutrients vultures often need to feed only once a day or even once every few days.

Turkey vultures are found throughout the entire continental United States and southern Canada and are migratory throughout most of this range. As I am sure you have noticed here, vultures are very social - roosting, feeding and often flying together. They separate only for breeding which first occurs at about three years of age. Instead of a nest they usually use a cave, hollow tree or rock crevice to lay their eggs, generally two whitish eggs with dark brown splotches. Incubation lasts from 34-41 days and the nestlings are ready to leave the nest in 9 weeks. Chicks are fed regurgitated food, not fresh pieces of meat. Yummm.

The **Black Vulture** is a little smaller than the Turkey Vulture and holds its wings flat when soaring. If you are watching they fly, you can tell them apart because they flap their shorter wings more often and more rapidly than turkey vultures. Its eyesight and hearing are not as acute as the Turkey Vulture, so it often takes advantage of the turkey vulture's sharper senses by following it to

its next meal. Neither of these birds has a voice box and will only emit hisses or grunts when feeding or disturbed at its nest.

An interesting note is that the **California and Andean Condors** are also vultures. The California condor is one of the most endangered birds. Its population steadily declined to fewer than 25 birds mainly due to shooting and poisoning. In 1992, the first captive-bred California condors were reintroduced in California. The Andean Condor has a wingspan of 11 feet making it one of the largest flying birds. It is found in western South America. While it may kill living prey, the California Condor never does. Altogether, these are interesting, if not always attractive birds.