

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Turkey Vulture

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Birds are the most frequently cited draw of visitors to the Sax-Zim Bog. Every year, owls, warblers, finches, and more attract visitors from around the country and world during all seasons. There is one species that may not make the "must see" list for everyone and it is our spotlight species for today: Turkey Vulture!

Turkey Vultures are one of the most widespread and abundant species of vulture in the world, ranging across North America from southern Canada all the way to the tip of South America. Some populations of Turkey Vultures are long distance migrants, where others are year-round residents. You can find Turkey Vultures on the fringes of the Boreal Forest, soaring over prairie landscapes, and well into the deserts of the Southwestern United States and even inland, high altitude deserts in Chile.

Vultures are perhaps one of the most, if not the most, important creatures in an ecosystem. As scavengers, they play a critical role in recycling dead and decaying matter, which can be critical in keeping diseases at bay. Their incredibly acidic stomach acidic

allows them to consume material from animals that died as result of nasty bacterial or fungal infections, like Botulism or Anthrax, without fear of being infected themselves. Turkey Vultures are also particularly well adapted to dry conditions, compared to other vulture species.

Turkey Vultures are incredibly skilled flyers, with complex social behaviors. All vultures have incredibly broad, wide wings that allow them to stay aloft without much effort. Their wings allow them to cover great distances without flapping and allow them to soar to great height. Turkey Vultures have been recorded flying as high as 20,000 feet, with the current elevation record attained by another vulture species, Ruppel's Griffon, at around 37,000 feet! Turkey Vulture's signature "V" shaped wings allow to soar at lower altitudes more efficiently than "flat-winged" soaring species.

One of the most interesting and often unseen parts of a vulture's life are their social relationships. Vultures have great eyesight and use their eyesight to find other vultures which may have found some food. Turkey Vultures have an especially good sense of smell, which they use to find carcasses. Different than other raptors, vultures communally roost regularly with other vultures.

While we may not get the full diversity of social interactions in Turkey Vultures, the epicenter of their social behaviors can be seen in the tropics. For example, Black Vultures seek out Turkey Vultures when looking for carcasses. Black Vultures lack the strong sense of smell that Turkey Vultures use to find food, so they rely on their eyesight to find Turkey Vultures. In turn, Turkey

Vultures often seek out King Vultures, who have much stronger bills that can open up particularly tough carcasses (much like how Common Ravens seek out wolves and eagles when scavenging).

Unfortunately, these amazing birds are in trouble globally. While Turkey Vultures might be one of the most abundant vultures in the world, many of their relatives are at risk of extinction due to continued persecution, contamination of food sources, and even habitat loss. Of the 23 species of vulture in the world, at least 12 species are endangered or critically endangered, with another 4 species listed as threatened. With a better understanding of these birds, hopefully we can all develop a greater appreciation for the importance of these birds.

More information about Turkey Vultures is included in the photos below!

(Photos below by Sparky Stensaas)



Turkey Vultures have a very distinct flight style and shape. Not only do they wobble back and forth in the air, they hold their wings in a very strong "V" or dihedral. They have bicolored underwings, with the back half of the wing showing a silvery-gray color contrasting with the dark leading edge of the underwing.



Rarely do you see Turkey Vultures on the ground, but even more rarely do you see them in the snow! Turkey Vultures typically migrate out of our area in big numbers during the first weeks of October. Very few records exist of Turkey Vultures overwintering in Minnesota (and almost all of those records were injured birds that couldn't migrate). In the Spring, Turkey Vultures begin to arrive in late-March.



Very rarely does one ever see a vulture on the ground, unless there is a carcass nearby. If you are driving along the highway and see vultures feeding, do slow down when passing the carcass.

Both eagles and vultures take a long time to fly up from the ground and have increased risk of being hit by cars when they are feeding near traffic.



Vultures are the only obligate scavenging vertebrate species in the world. That means nearly all of the food they consume comes from scavenging. Turkey Vultures primarily scavenge smaller carcasses, but have also been known to predate bird nests.



Often you vultures perched with their wings spread wide, especially during the early parts of a day. This posture is all about thermoregulation, whether that means cooling the bird down during hot temperatures or warming up during cold temperatures.