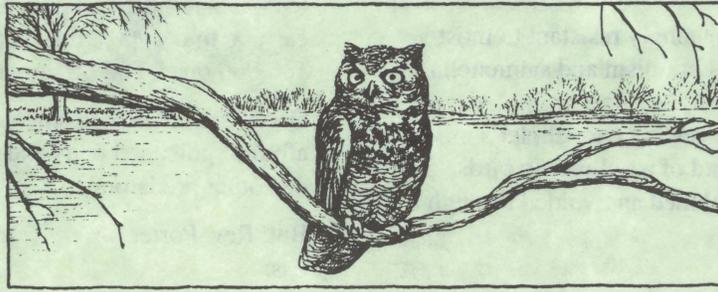


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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TURKEY VULTURES: HIGH-DEATH T.V.S

-- Mark Spreyer

*Prophet of evil! bird of omen, foul!
Unstained by living blood,
Corruption is thy food;
How man abhors thee, horrid ghoul!*
--Rev. T. C. Porter

This opening of Reverend Porter's nineteenth-century vulture poem does not exactly paint a pretty picture. In some areas, though, returning turkey buzzards are seen as harbingers of spring. Let's take a closer look at these increasingly common summer residents.

IS A VULTURE A BUZZARD?

It depends on where you are. If you are celebrating Buzzard Sunday in Hinckley, Ohio, you are welcoming the mid-March return of turkey vultures to the area. If you are photographing a jackal buzzard in S. Africa, you are not focusing on a vulture. Instead, you are zooming in on a *buteo*, a genus of hawks.

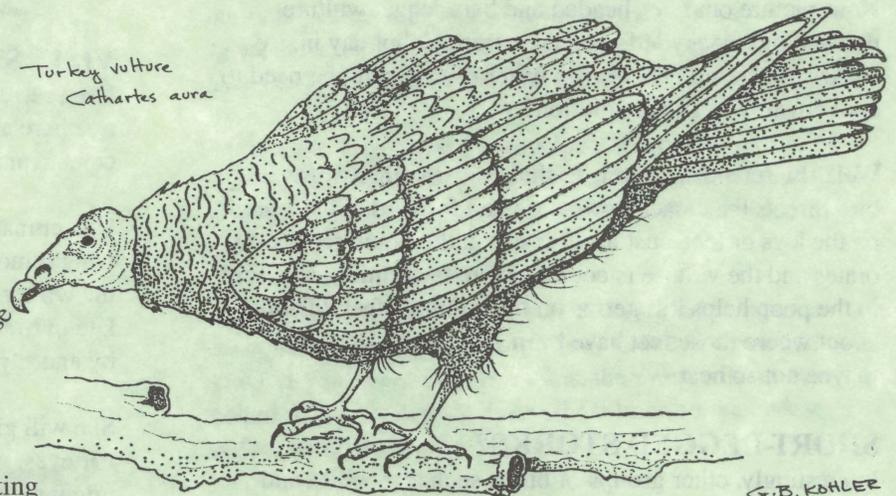
Buteo comes from the Latin *butes*, which refers to broad-winged hawks. This Latin term also gave rise to the old French word *busart*, which led to buzzard. So, for the most part, in the New World buzzard refers to a vulture while in the Old World it refers to a *buteo*. Of course, both *buteos* and vultures have broad wings.

Vulture wings, however, are much larger. The largest *buteo* commonly seen in our area, the red-tailed hawk, has a wingspan of approximately four feet. The turkey vulture measures close to six feet from wingtip to wingtip.

In fact, the only raptorial bird large enough to confuse with a turkey vulture is a bald eagle.

So, if they are a long way off, how do you tell them apart? The flight profile, looking head on, of a bald eagle is flat.

Turkey vulture
Cathartes aura



Turkey vultures hold their wings in a shallow 'V,' called a dihedral and similar to the wings of some hang gliders.

I can't help but think this wing arrangement is highly energy efficient, so to speak, as turkey vultures rarely flap their wings. Instead, they tilt and tip from side to side as if balancing on an unseen high wire,

UP CLOSE AND VERY PERSONAL!

At close range, a turkey vulture won't be confused with any other bird of prey because, unlike a bald eagle, the vulture is really bald.

While a small red-skinned head is not particularly attractive, it is an example of form following function. Think about it. You make your living slurping down the guts of road-ripened raccoon, deer, rabbit, and opossum. When your head comes out of those rotting body cavities, it is covered with bacteria-laden slime.

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Now, what kills bacteria? Ultra-violet light from the sun. How to maximize the amount of sun hitting sticky skin? You got it, less feathers.

Not surprisingly, vultures are amazingly resistant to most diseases found in carrion such as botulism and salmonella.

As if these adaptations aren't interesting enough, let's move from the head end to the other end of a vulture. In birds, you see, feces and urine are combined and voided through a single opening or vent.

Why am I telling you this? Keep in mind that birds don't sweat. What good would sweat-soaked feathers be if you needed to fly away?

Now, picture our bare-headed and bare-legged vulture perched on a rocky ledge on an extremely hot day in, say, an Arizona desert. There's no water nearby and you need to cool down. What's the solution?

Well, the scientific term is urohidrosis. In other words, the bird directs the cloaca downward and forward to defecate on the legs or feet. Just as with sweat, the liquid feces evaporates and the vulture is cooled down. In addition, uric acid in the poop helps kill germs on the vulture's feet. (Think about where those feet have been.) Neat, eh? Hmmm, maybe not so neat.

SHORT-LEGGED STORKS?

Interestingly, other groups of birds, such as boobies and storks, excrete on themselves to cool down. Traditionally, vultures were grouped with diurnal birds of prey based on their hooked beaks plus similar migratory and feeding habits. However, due to behavioral (i.e. urohidrosis) and genetic studies, their relationship to storks has been accepted.

The question that scientists are still wrestling with is when did our New World vultures split from the stork branch in the ornithological family tree? Suffice it to say, it was a long, long, time ago.

DINNER SMELLS

It should not come as a surprise that the turkey vultures have a great sense of smell. Even with their excellent eyesight, soaring vultures aren't going to be able to spot a dead raccoon if it is laying under a stand of trees but they will smell it.

In fact, vultures have been attracted to stinkhorns, mushrooms that smell horrid. The stink is intended to attract flies which land and then spread the mushrooms' sticky spores.

To be precise, the vulture-attracting gas emitted by carrion is ethyl mercaptan. When looking for leaks, natural gas companies have learned to introduce this odorant into pipelines. Then, all they have to do is look for where the vultures are circling.

PERSECUTED IN THE PAST

The attitude expressed in Rev. Porter's poem led to unnecessary vulture deaths long after it was generally acknowledged that vultures are beneficial scavengers. During the early to mid-1900s, for instance, Texas ranchers killed over 100,000 black and turkey vultures.

Given their ability to smell rotting meat, vultures also ran afoul of poisoned baits and leg-hold traps set out for various other predators.

But, Rev. Porter knew the truth. His vulture poem continues:

*And yet thou art a minister of God
To rid the world of pestilence and taint;
Thou sparest both the sinner and the saint
Under the sod.*

VISIT STILLMAN'S TURKEY VULTURE

I've seen as many as four turkey vultures perched in a dead tree here at Stillman but most of my recent vulture insights come from watching our resident bird.

Unfortunately, she was shot and had to have part of one wing removed. She is in a heated area, off display, during the winter months but we hope to put her back on display late in March. When she returns, stop by and say hello.

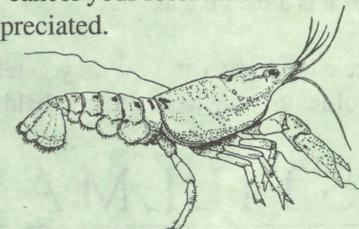
She will give you the once over with her eyes. As you return the gesture, you might recall that the vulture adorned the statue of Isis in ancient Egypt. Vultures and humans have been eyeing each other through the ages.



PROGRAMS

Program Basics: TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs (except for bird banding open houses), PLEASE CALL US AT 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.



WOODCOCK WATCHES

In past years, the woodcocks have put on quite a show. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Bring your binoculars and come join the fun!



Date: Saturdays, March 22 & 29
Time: 6:30PM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up

BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.



Dates: Sundays, April 6 & May 4
Time: 9:00AM to Noon
Fee: None

SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Migration will be under way and you never know what we might find. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. *Please call 428-OWLS to make reservations.*

Date: Sundays, April 20 & May 18
Time: 8:00AM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up

WILDFLOWER WALKS

Join us as we explore Stillman's woodlands in search of ephemeral beauties such as white trillium, may-apple, Virginia bluebell and jack-in-the-pulpit. Bring your camera!



Dates: Sundays, May 4 & 11
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

SPECIAL EVENTS

DON'T MISS RAPTOR SUNDAY!

Has the taxman sunk his talons into you? Come see how it's done in nature! Meet the Great Horned and Screech Owls plus a peregrine falcon and Broad-winged Hawk. We will bring the birds out so you can see them up close. Bring a camera and a friend! Drop by anytime between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon.

Date: Sunday, April 13
Time: 1:00 - 3:00 PM
Fee: None



SOLAR OBSERVING ON (what else?) SUNDAY

Join the Northwest Suburban Astronomers and observe our nearest star with special telescopes and filters. See sun spots, filaments, and solar prominences in remarkable detail! This will be a fun and safe activity for the entire family.

After observing the sun, take a hike on your own or join a walk led by Stillman's naturalist and enjoy the life-giving properties of the sun as spring flowers and birds return to our area.

If you like, bring a dish and join us for a potluck picnic. *Remember to call Stillman at (847) 428-OWLS and let us know if you're coming. If it rains, the event will be cancelled. If the weather is iffy, call Stillman for an update before making the trip.*

Date: Sunday, April 27
Time: Noon - 4:00PM

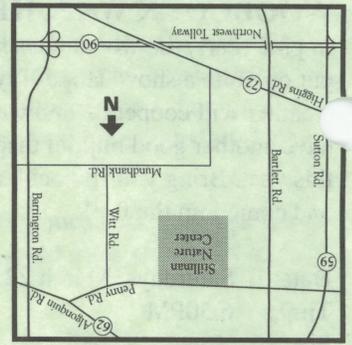
SUMMER HOURS BEGIN IN APRIL

In March, Stillman will be open to drop-in visitors on Sundays from 11 AM to 4 PM. Starting in April, Stillman will be open Sundays from 9 AM to 4 PM.

Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is available, by reservation, during the week to school classes, Audubon chapters, garden clubs, and other organized groups. For a brochure that describes the programs and fees, just call (847) 428-OWLS.

CALLING VOLUNTEERS

Stillman has the tools. We need healthy, outdoor-loving bodies to wield them. Thursday mornings are our usual work times. We start at 9:00 AM and wrap up around noon. Questions? Call (847) 428-OWLS(6957) or email us at stillnc@wildblue.net.



Email: stillnc@wildblue.net
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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.
I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
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