



MONTEREY NEWS



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Turkey Vultures Cleaning the Landscape

One of the first signs of spring may be turkey vultures (often simply called “TVs”) circling overhead to clean up carcasses killed by cars, which they can locate from miles away with their keen sense of smell. The flight of a turkey vulture is easily recognized by its pattern of lazy circles overhead. Turkey vultures, also called “turkey buzzards,” are very large birds with six-foot wingspans splayed out with a very dark wings followed by pale gray trailing edges. As they fly their wings form a shallow “V” that can appear a little unsteady as they rock up and down. They hunt to find recent carrion that may have died naturally or remains of animals killed but not fully eaten. Look for them near garbage dumps where carrion picked up by highway crews may be left.

Vultures have suffered from poor public relations since Charles Darwin called them highly disgusting birds habitually tainted by an aura of rotting flesh. Their bright red, featherless heads and necks, as illustrated, let them get away with eating dead putrid bodies. This adaptation reduces the risk of fowling feathers and contacting germs from deteriorating corpses. Avid birdwatchers are content to keep their distance, especially when vultures are feeding their young by regurgitating carrion into their mouths while making guttural grunts and groans with the effort.

Two groups of vultures provide an excellent example of divergent evolution from adapting to varied conditions on several different continents. Strangely enough, all the “old-world” vultures across the pond have absolutely no smelling ability so they can only rely on their vision to locate their food. They must then hunt in low-level flight much like our local harrier hawk. These vultures can use their legs and feet to grasp live prey-like birds and small mammals, a specialized use of these



vultures’ bodies to survive. The endangered California condor, the largest flying bird in North America, also has very limited sense of smell, however, they soar at tremendous heights.

The turkey vultures in New England have recently been joined by another species, black vultures. Since the mid-nineteenth century black vultures have expanded their range from southern states up into New England coastal states on the eastern seaboard. They have recently been identified on Buzzards Bay and have more and more been seen in our Monterey area.

Now with both turkey and black vultures circling overhead, helping to remove the dead animals, some of which might carry diseases, future generations may benefit from an improved environment. Without the creatures from the largest vultures to the smallest beetles that consume the remains, our environment would quickly become overwhelmed. — George Emmons