



Oregon Sea Grant Extension
Sustainable Tourism &
Outdoor Recreation Program

Interpretative Fact Sheet

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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Turkey Vulture (Cathartes aura)

 tourism.oregonstate.edu/turkey-vulture-cathartes-aura/

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***Some people think vultures are ugly. More than just another ‘buzzard’
Turkey Vultures are part of Mother Nature’s Cleanup Crew.***



Turkey Vulture (Royalty free Unsplash.com)

Turkey vultures have a large-wingspan up to six feet. These good sized birds (nearly three feet in length) can weigh up to five pounds.

Body feathers are dark, brownish-black with silvery-gray flight feathers on the underside. In flight, the bird seems to wobble, infrequently flapping its wings, and relying on the thermal air currents to carry it low to the ground.

The head looks small in proportion to the bird’s body and is a distinctive gnarly red with few feathers. Juveniles have gray gnarly heads.

Diet and Prey

The beak is interesting because you can see through it from one side to another—the nostrils are not divided. Unlike most birds, Turkey vultures have an excellent sense of smell to help them identify decay.

The relatively short, hooked, ivory-colored beak is weak. The vulture cannot tear the tough hides of larger animals. To solve this problem the vultures hang out with other bigger birds and clean up after.

They rarely, if ever, kill. Turkey vultures typically feed on recent kills, roadside kills, some fruits and vegetables, and fish stranded in shallow water.

Turkey vultures have flat feet that are relatively weak. The feet are poorly adapted for grasping and walking. On the ground it has an ungainly, hopping walk.

The tracks measure between 3.5 and 5.5 inches in length (including claws).

Predators and Defense

The turkey vulture has few natural predators and keen eye sight. Predators include golden and bald eagles, great horned owls, red tailed hawks, and nests can be ravaged by raccoons, opossums, and occasionally foxes.



Turkey vulture in flight (Courtesy of ODFW)

Defense

Vultures lack a syrinx which is the vocal organ for birds. Rather than graceful twitters, it grunts and hisses low with its. Young hungry birds will often grunt; adults during the courtship display will also grunt.

This bird uses rather creative defense strategies when protecting its nest, fighting, or trying to make a quick exit. The bird will hiss when feeling threatened or when fighting for a carcass.

If it cannot flee, the vulture will feign death or vomit. Even the babies will hiss and vomit. This foul-smelling substance can sting face and eyes.

Nesting

Turkey vultures nest in sheltered areas that could include crevices, under rocks, caves, dense thickets, old buildings, and hollow trees. The vultures will nest in caves, but generally will not enter the cave except during the breeding season.

A traditional nest is not built. Eggs will rest on a flat area.

Let's Party

These vultures are gregarious. During the mating process, several birds will gather in a circle and perform a ritualized hopping dance around the circle with wings partially spread.

They will communally roost on dead trees and manmade structures at night. They are able to lower their nighttime body temperature by about 6 degrees C. which reduces heart and respiratory rates, and blood pressure.

Range and Habitat

Turkey vultures are a permanent resident in the southern U.S. and is widespread over open country, shrub and grasslands, deserts, foothills, subtropical forest. It prefers open or semi-open areas and generally avoids heavily forested areas.

Welcome sign of spring

Vultures are a typical sign of spring and what would be spring without some cleaning? Vultures are a critical part of Mother Nature's Clean-up crew.

As much as we might want to ignore it... cleaning up is a critical task that some body has to do. The Turkey vulture is a real tough cookie. We know it is tough... after all how many birds do you know of whose droppings will kill trees? Amazing.

REFERENCES:

- Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (<https://myodfw.com/wildlife-viewing/species/raptors>)
- Wikipedia, Turkey Vulture (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey_vulture)
- Audubon Society Field Guide (<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/turkey-vulture>)