



TURKEY VULTURE

Carthartes aura

Order Falconiformes
Family Cathartidae
Genus Cathartes
Species aura

Geographic Range

Southern Canada to the rest of North and South America.
Non-migratory in California and southern US.

Habitat

Grasslands, forests and deserts

Niche

Arboreal, diurnal, carnivorous, gregarious

Wild Diet

Carrion, mostly from medium to larger sized mammals

Life Span

10 – 15 years in the wild, oldest known in captivity is Toulouse born in 1972

Appearance

Dark brown to black feathers with white or grey wing-pits. Wingspan is 6 feet, length from head to tail is between 25 – 29 inches and weight is 3 – 4 pounds.

Adaptations

A bare featherless head is easier to keep clean while feeding from carrion. As they fly, they tip from side to side, soaring on thermal updrafts. Turkey vultures are so good at riding on thermals, they can fly for hours without flapping their wings. Along with good eyesight, turkey vultures also possess a well-developed olfactory system. They are attracted to the smell of mercaptan, a gas given off by decaying animals.

Fun Facts

Adult turkey vultures have few natural predators but will vomit up a foul smelling substance which can sting the eyes and face of an animal looking for an easy meal from a turkey vulture nest.



At the Zoo

"Toulouse" located at Hawk Hill in front of the Koret Animal Resource Center was born in 1972, making him one of the oldest known captive turkey vultures in the world. "Monty" is also found on Hawk Hill and was born in 2006.

Comparison

Turkey vultures are much smaller than their relatives the California condor which has a wingspan of 8 – 9 feet. California condors have a much smaller range than turkey vultures and are critically endangered in the wild, whereas turkey vultures are the most common vulture in the New World. As of November 2008, there are a total of 327 California condors, only half of which live in the wild.

Status and Conservation

Turkey vultures are not currently threatened in the wild, but their relative the California condor is critically endangered.

Threats

As carrion eaters, turkey vultures are threatened by any poison that might be present in a dead animal, such as pesticides. They are also susceptible to lead poisoning from eating animals that have been killed by lead bullets. When the bullet enters the animal, it breaks up into many tiny pieces which can then be ingested by the turkey vulture.

Bibliography

Nature Trail Handbook, Handbook of Birds of the World, Animal Diversity Web

