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Winged Undertakers Digest the Deceased

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN



Although no one can for sure say why, turkey vultures have become increasingly common during the past two decades. Often referred to as “TVs” by birding enthusiasts, turkey vultures derive their name from the featherless, red heads of adults. And there’s no denying that, at least from a distance, a roosted vulture does somewhat resemble a male wild turkey.

There’s good reason for the vulture’s distinctive, though ugly, bare head. As an avid consumer of carrion, TVs routinely forage in some pretty nasty places. The complete lack of head and neck feathers aids in maintaining cleanliness. Contrary to popular belief, vultures are among the cleanest of birds, spending up to four hours per day bathing and preening—more time than is documented for any other Iowa bird.



“It’s a dirty job but someone

“It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it.” We’ve all heard that line a thousand times. But for me, the well-worn phrase gained new meaning as I paused to watch members of a local highway cleanup crew doing their dirty job. The crew was a gathering of turkey vultures, and the job site was located on the edge of a busy blacktop roadway. At the present moment, crew members were eagerly focused on the task of making last night’s roadkilled opossum disappear. Well tenderized by the tires of commuting motorists, the carcass had been reduced to a flat and greasy, fly-attracting mess. I could go on, but in the event you’re reading this article just before your own meal time, I’ll spare the details. Let’s just say that, to a human observer, the scene was more

than a bit disgusting. But for hungry vultures, the opportunity represented nothing less than a four-star banquet—an asphalt version of a carrion eater’s 21 Club of New York fame.

After slowing and pulling aside to observe, it quickly became apparent this bird show was not designed for anyone with a queasy stomach. Standing atop the unfortunate ‘possum’s remains, the vultures greedily slurped a savory blend of guts, fur, blood and bone.

Whenever speeding traffic approached, the huge birds reluctantly launched into the air. Once the coast was clear, the circling scavengers would land again and another bird or two would take their turn at the table. The scenario was repeated time and again. The efficiency of the cleanup was remarkable. In less than 10 minutes, all that remained of the deceased ‘possum was the tail, a

Serving as Iowa's "winged undertakers," turkey vultures have become increasingly common across much of the state. Although no one can say for certain, biologists speculate the species' continued expansion into Canada is at least partially the result of an increase in roadways—and more roadkilled mammals.



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few bits of hide, and a distinct grease spot on the rapidly warming pavement. Mission complete, the vultures flapped heavily into the air. Within minutes, the flock had soared high and drifted from view.

Anyone who spends much time outdoors is aware the turkey vulture has become an increasingly common feature of the Iowa landscape. With the species' six-foot wingspan, carnivorous habits, and soaring flight, most people assume that vultures are card-carrying members of the raptor family. Amazingly, they are more closely related to storks and flamingos than to hawks or eagles.

Unlike real birds of prey, who capture their food live and on the fly, vultures subsist on carrion. In other words, they are scavengers. As is the case with most scavenger-types, vultures routinely dine on some extremely nasty

entrees. But while the practice of feeding on decaying, maggot-infested dead animals may seem repulsive, the bird provides an essential environmental service by sanitizing the countryside. The vulture's bizarre and often odiferous menu selections aid in suppressing the spread of disease—particularly to domestic livestock.

As vultures consume wholesale quantities of carrion, they also ingest large doses of potentially dangerous bacteria. To survive that exposure, the scavengers disinfect their meals through means of a smoking hot, 108-degree digestive system that effectively destroys any living organisms that may happen to slide down their gullets—including such nasties as cholera and *E.coli*. With feeding vultures, it's a case of lethal pathogens coming in, and completely sterile whitewash going out.



Although vultures have keen eyesight and may locate food while soaring at great heights, they also have an acute sense of smell. Unlike most birds, which have little or no sense of smell, vultures have the unique ability to track down sun-ripened meals by simply following their beaks. Natural gas companies have utilized the turkey vulture's powerful olfactory to detect suspected leaks in underground pipelines. After adding a "carrion-like scent" to their naturally odorless product, gas workers simply sat back and watched the skies as gathering vultures pointed the way to defective lines.

I've had a couple of interesting vulture encounters of my own.

While searching for mushrooms in the bluff country of northeast Iowa's Clayton County, I once discovered the not-so-fresh remains of a Holstein cow which had fallen into a steep ravine and died. Because of overhanging rock ledges and thick brush, the cow was barely visible. Nevertheless, a large group of turkey vultures had successfully located the meal and were feeding with gusto. As I approached, the scavengers reluctantly took wing and vacated the premises. Then,

much to my amazement, another half dozen vultures began to emerge from inside the bloated carcass. One by one, the disturbed birds exited through a large tear in the Holstein's midriff. Disgusting to be sure, the scene gave new meaning to the term "dining in."

Even more memorable was an event that happened while hunting spring turkeys near western Iowa's loess hills.

After three hours of scaling some particularly rugged terrain, I finally gave in to what had become an unseasonably warm afternoon. Stretching out on a soft carpet of grass and leaves, I was soon fast asleep. Sometime later I was awakened by the loud flapping of wings. Cautiously opening my eyes, I was greeted to the intense stare of a turkey vulture standing less than a dozen feet away. To me, it was obvious that the feathery scavenger had been sizing me up as a potential meal. Upon discovering that I was still alive, the huge bird immediately left the scene.

I still think about that big, black turkey vulture from time to time. I've always hoped the bird found me by using its eyes instead of its nose. 🐼



Turkey vultures build no nests but prefer to lay their eggs in natural cavities. Large birds require large nest sites, and vultures frequently use spacious cavities found within rotting trunks of aging trees. Along the bluff-shrouded corridor of the upper Mississippi River, turkey vultures may nest in natural shallow caves found on vertical walls of limestone cliffs.

Ever resourceful, vultures also find nest sites in abandoned farm buildings—especially across Iowa's less timbered interior. Located in barn hay lofts or attics of retired wooden corn cribs, nests are often situated in dimly lit corners where rafters or crude board shelving provide a platform for eggs and young.

Although adults do little to defend their nest, startled nestlings will eject a vile stream of partially digested carrion. The smell alone is usually enough to discourage further advances from intruders.