Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) – Scavenger of the Sky

Did you Know?

They fly low to the ground to pick up the scent of dead animals.

Turkey vultures soar in the thermal wind stream. This in combination with their large wing span allows them to glide far and wide distances without flapping their wings.

As a messy eater, the Turkey Vulture adapted to having talons large enough to pick pieces of food from their nostrils.

Habitat – open areas including roadsides, farms, along country sides, landfills, open fields, cliffs. At night, they will roost in trees or high rocks to keep away from predators.

Size – 64-81 cm in length, wingspan of 170-178cm, 2000 grams in weight

Range – Winter in southern United States and Central America. Breeding months are spent in United States and southern Canada.

Status – S5, Secure in Ontario and Canada.

Diet – The Turkey Vultures are known as the “Clean-up Crew” of nature, since they only feast on the remains of dead animals. Whether it be road kill, another animals dead prey, or animals that die of natural causes, they will eat squirrels, raccoons, rabbits, possums, and more.
Identification:

Although not the pretties of Ontario’s birds, the Turkey Vulture is most often seen soaring in the sky, circling its prey. They’re large and broad six foot wing span and large brownish-black feathers allows them to glide far distances. The vulture also has light coloured feathers under the wings, making these a distinct identification feature. At their wingtips, the feathers make shapes of fingers during flight. Further, the bald, red head and their pale, sharply hooked beaks are other key distinguishing feature.

Interesting Facts

Turkey vultures are known for their bare red head. This is because when they feast on their dead prey, it keeps it cleaner than if they were covered in feathers head to toe. This is an important evolutionary adaption that prevents the bird from getting dead animal matter glued to their face. It also makes self bathing faster and easier.

Since they only prey on animals that are already dead, they have a special skill that allows them to detect the gases that are released during the decomposition process. The birds can sense this gas at an amazing few parts per trillion.

Bacteria and other dead animal material can get caught in the birds wings. To clean the bacteria away, the vulture will stand with their wings spread wide open and use the suns rays to kill of bacteria and dry their wings. In contrast, they will defecate on their legs to cool themselves down and to get rid of fleas and ticks that are on them from their food.

The Turkey Vulture will regurgitate its food to distract following threatening predators. This also allows them to fly lighter, therefore allowing them to fly faster to get away from danger.
The Turkey Vulture on the Niagara Escarpment

The Bruce Trail Conservancy is continually acquiring and protecting land along the Niagara Escarpment, including cliffs and open areas which provide a perfect habitat for the Turkey Vulture. During migration time in the spring and fall, the Niagara Escarpment provides the perfect opportunity to watch for these birds. You may see them riding gracefully on the thermal updrafts of the Escarpment cliffs and ridges. Don’t stand too still in awe of these amazing soaring animals, though... You may fool some vultures into thinking your next on their menu!