



Smaller than life

Turkey Vulture

Coloring instructions:

Red - the bald head

White - the beak

Light gray - the primary and secondary feathers on the wings

Reddish-pink - the legs

Black - the eye, the wing linings and the rest of the body

Turkey Vulture

Length: 25"

Wingspan: 72"

Habitat: Common resident in all habitats.

Field marks: Very large, dark soaring bird. Look for the wide V-shape when bird is soaring. They tend to rock from side-to-side as they glide. The feathers on the wing tips are spread out.

What would the world look like if nothing ate dead animals? Turkey vultures eat **carrion** (already dead animals). Eating rotting bodies might seem gross but it's an important job. If an animal dies from disease, the disease can spread from that animal to other animals. But the Turkey Vultures can eat meat contaminated with powerful diseases and not get sick. Therefore, they can prevent the disease from spreading to other animals.

Like doctors who work with diseases, Turkey Vultures try to keep very clean. They spend lots of time each day **preening** (using the beak to clean and straighten feathers). The one place that a bird cannot preen with its beak is its head. Think what a mess a feathered head would become if it was stuck in a dead deer. The head of a vulture is bare, red skin - much easier to keep clean.

Eating carrion poses another challenge. There is no way to know when the next animal will die. To find carrion, the vulture must search many square miles. But if the vulture uses too much energy in its search, it will starve to death before it

finds its next meal. This challenge has shaped much of the body and behavior of the Turkey Vulture.

Large wings and a light body make vultures masters of **soaring** - flying without flapping a wing. This allows them to search without spending much energy.

Vultures soar in search of places where heated air rising can lift the vultures high into the sky. These **thermals** are free air rides upwards.

In order to stay within these narrow columns of rising air, vultures must spiral in tight circles. The underwing of the vulture is shiny. Other vultures see flashes of reflected sunlight from the underwing of the spiraling vulture. The flash says, "There's a thermal here!"

Other vultures quickly glide to that place to join in on the free ride. On the other hand, if other vultures see flashing wings spiraling down, that might mean the spiraling vulture is descending towards carrion. Again, other vultures quickly gather in anticipation of their next meal.

Turkey Vulture Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify a Turkey Vulture. See the wide V-shape of the wings.
- Watch breezes rock the large-winged, light-bodied Turkey Vulture from side to side.
- See the red, featherless head of the Turkey Vulture.
- See the flash from the underwing as the Turkey Vulture circles.
- See a Turkey Vulture spiraling upward (indicating a thermal). Watch how quickly other vultures appear and join the thermal. How many vultures can you see in a thermal?
- See a Turkey Vulture spiraling downward (indicating possible carrion).
- See vultures sitting in the morning (especially after cool, dewy nights) with backs and outspread wings facing the sun. One explanation is that the vultures are practicing passive solar heating.

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