

Conservation Corner

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October 12, 2016

I was returning to Pocahontas late in the afternoon last week when a kettle of 12-15 turkey vultures brewing above the intersection of Highways 3 & 4 caught my eye. The next day, I was entering Pomeroy when a kettle of 5 or 6 turkey vultures catching and spiraling on warm updrafts caught my eye. It's time for this often underrated and unappreciated resident of our county to fly across Conservation Corner.

Turkey vultures are named for the featherless, red heads of the adults that, from a distance, somewhat resemble male wild turkeys. Found through the Americas, they are our most common scavenging bird of prey. Their Latin name *Cathartes aura* translates as "breezy cleanser."

"It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it." We've all been fed that line before. Luckily for us, turkey vultures feed on carrion, quickly and efficiently sanitizing the countryside while controlling the spread of disease. Luckily for them, their strong immune and extra hot digestive systems destroy any pathogens they may pick up.

Turkey vultures have keen eyesight as well as an acute sense of smell that allows them to detect fresh carrion from more than a mile away. Did you know they want their mammal meat as fresh as possible and prefer meat of plant-eating mammals?

Some natural gas companies use turkey vultures to detect gas leaks in underground pipelines. After adding a "carrion-like scent" to odorless natural gas, they simply watch the skies as the vultures point the way to defective lines.

Turkey vultures lay 1-3 eggs that are whitish-cream in color with dark brown or lavender spots in a protected place such as cliff, cave, hollow tree, or abandoned farm building. Adults share child raising duties, taking turns incubating for 30 to 40 days and regurgitating food for the nestlings for 10 to 11 weeks.

Despite scavenging for a living and urinating on their legs to keep cool during hot weather, turkey vultures are very clean birds. They spend up to four hours a day bathing and preening, more time than is documented for any other Iowa bird. Wildlife rehabilitators find them to be gentle, inquisitive, and very intelligent. They like to play games and often you will catch them playing follow the leader, tag, and speed soaring.

Turkey vultures roost on dead trees in large groups called "wakes." They will live in the same communal roost most of their life, sleeping in the same roost in the same tree on the same branch every night, which can cause problems if that tree happens to be in your neighborhood.

Like all birds of prey, turkey vultures are protected under the migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Biologists don't know for sure why they have become increasingly common over the past two decades. All of nature is preparing for winter, including the turkey vultures as they gather into migrating flocks to spend the winter in Central and South America where the carrion won't be frozen solid!

