

Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

Turkey Vultures



My husband and I are just returned from a weekend in San Francisco. It was an ideal time for anyone interested in bird life to visit the City. San Francisco, like Vancouver, lies on the Pacific flyway, a major migration route for birds heading south in the fall.

It's always a thrill, when you are hundreds of miles away from home, to see familiar birds. If they are birds in the process of migrating, I can't help but wonder if they originated in the Lower Mainland.

Recently the Wildlife Rehabilitation Association of BC (WRA) treated a very interesting bird here in Burnaby. We were lucky enough to see the same species in San Francisco.

The bird in question is the Turkey Vulture. The Turkey Vulture breeds across southern B.C. and Vancouver Island and in late September and early October heads south to winter in South America.

My cousin, Lola, was the first to spot this particular bird. It was hovering above a cliff holding its wings in a V-shape, teetering from side to side. This is how it maintains stability and lift at low altitudes.

Turkey Vultures are weak fliers. They will often take advantage of thermal updrafts to keep them aloft, while they search for carrion below. Despite a broad wing span of 185 centimeters (six feet), they only weigh around 1.4 kilograms (three pounds). This light weight means that they can float in the air, rising on thermal currents for hours; an effective energy saver for the long flight south. While pilots have reported seeing Turkey Vultures as high as 6000 metres, we were not lucky enough to see any on our flight to San Francisco.

Of course this technique, while wonderfully efficient, has its disadvantages. When local Turkey Vultures migrate south from Vancouver Island they must cross the Strait of Juan

de Fuca. Cool air often eliminates warm thermal draughts and sometimes the birds will have to wait for weeks for suitable conditions.

I am told that viewing Turkey Vultures as they attempt to cross the strait is a fascinating experience. Best viewing is found at the Aylard Farm end of East Sooke Regional Park, west of Victoria. Too late this year, but next year schedule a trip to the Island in the last two weeks of September or early October.

The bird we saw, hovering above the San Francisco cliffs, might well have been on the look out for food. The Turkey Vulture has a very keen sense of smell and sharp eyesight. It is able to detect mercapton, a gas produced at the beginning of decay, from over one and a half kilometres away. The part of its brain responsible for processing smells is particularly large, compared to other birds.

Turkey Vultures like fresh carrion, preferably from an herbivore. We didn't see any dead cows on the cliffs so presume it was after something smaller. They feed by first tearing the carcass with their powerful beaks and then thrusting their heads into the body cavity of the animal. This messy way of eating explains why the Turkey Vultures, like other carrion eaters, have almost bald heads. Also a good explanation for why many human babies are born without hair. Mine, alas had lots of hair, frequently matted with food.

Interestingly these birds do not feed exclusively on carrion and will also eat plant matter, including shoreline vegetation, crops, insects and invertebrates.

Turkey Vultures are not vocal animals, making only minor grunts and hisses. However, a Turkey Vulture has one very interesting defense mechanism. If disturbed or harassed it will throw up on the creature bothering it. The sharp smell and sting is enough to put off most intruders. If you have ever been in a room when a Turkey Vulture has done this, you will appreciate why it works.

As you stop to enjoy the wonderful sight of birds in flight, take time to think about where they are coming from, where they are going, and what they have to do to survive to get there. There are many hazards along the way and some will not make it. The Turkey Vulture we treated at the WRA did not.

Do your part to keep on important migratory flyway safe for birds in transit. Keep an eye on your pet cat at this time of year. Tired and hungry birds in transit often fall prey to well-fed neighbourhood cats. Place decals on large panes of glass to prevent birds fling into them.

Enjoy a wonderful fall season of bird watching as our feathered friends cross the globe.

Nicky Fried writes for the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC located at 5216 Glencarin Drive on Burnaby Lake. The Wildlife Rescue Association cares for injured, orphaned and pollution damaged wildlife. If you have an animal in distress call the WRA at 604.526.7275.

