



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1941

TURKEY VULTURE NESTING, FEEDING HABITS ARE RECORDED BY SCIENTISTS

Two resourceful scientists of the Iowa Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit patiently kept almost literally on the tail of a flock of turkey vultures and recently concluded their studies with a detailed report on the nesting and feeding habits of the chief avian scavenger in the United States, the Fish and Wildlife Service reported today.

At least 15 items of food were found in the gullet contents removed from the live vultures. Moles, striped skunks, house cats, mice, squirrels, snakes, and plant debris had been eaten by the indiscriminating bird.

From blinds placed close to a vulture roost, the two scientists observed the nesting habits of the birds and noted that the young are fed on schedule. Each morning and afternoon an adult visited the tree cavity in which its nest was hidden and fed the young.

The turkey vulture apparently is a cautious bird, the observers reported, because each adult usually alighted on a tree near the nest and "after a wait, presumably to learn if danger were near, would either fly away or drop to a limb outside the cavity entrance and then enter."

Climbing a tree to inspect a nest, the investigators obtained first-hand information on the behavior of the young. When the nest cavity was examined, the young hissed and thumped the dry-rotted wood of the floor with their feet. "These antics proved to be largely show," said the scientists, "for the birds were not difficult to handle."

The birds' rate of growth was measured for almost 2 months. On June 28, one bird had a wing measurement of about 10-1/2 inches. The wing grew rapidly, as shown by four other measurements, until on August 10 it was more than 17 inches long.

A detailed report of these observations was recently published under the title "Turkey Vultures in Central Iowa," by Thomas G. Scott, leader of the unit, and Robert Moorman, graduate student, the scientists who made the study. Copies may be obtained by writing to the Iowa State Conservation Commission, Des Moines, Iowa, or to the Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa.

The Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit is financially sponsored by the Iowa State College and Agricultural Experiment Station, the Iowa State Conservation Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior.

- C -

NOTE TO EDITORS: The following is included for the convenience of those who wish to run a longer story.

The turkey vulture, commonly called turkey buzzard, has long been a familiar sight in the southern United States. The bird's range includes the western hemisphere from Patagonia to Canada. Listed as one of the birds of prey, the species as a rule does not inflict death but searches, watches, and waits until it comes upon a dead or disabled animal, whereupon it will cautiously glide down to feed.

Whether the vulture obtains its food through its sense of smell, its keen eyesight, or both, is still a matter of argument among scientists. Certain it is that the turkey vulture seldom misses a meal that may be available in the area over which it reconnoiters.

"On the ground, the bird appears uncouth and awkward," according to W. L. McAtee, technical adviser of the Fish and Wildlife Service, "but in the air the turkey buzzard shows a skill, particularly in soaring, approached by few other birds. Its wonderful soaring flight has been a subject of much study by a multitude of observers, and the buzzard is not only the model but also the inspiration of the American-invented airplane."

Gliding about with the wind currents, the bird can soar for miles without beating its wings either to progress or gain altitude.

In flight, the turkey vulture often climbs to high altitudes. In 1933, the noted ornithologist of the American Museum of Natural History, Dr. F. M. Chapman observed hundreds of turkey buzzards passing over Barro Colorado Island, Panama, during migration. Some of the birds, he declared, flew at a height of 4,000 to 5,000 feet.

The vulture's feathers are chiefly black, but the head and neck are naked, revealing a bright red skin.

Invariably the females lay two eggs. The young are hatched in about 30 days and are ready to fly 8 or 9 weeks later. Though the adult is black, the entire body of the young vulture is covered with snow-white down.

While brooding the young, the adult is said to remain close to the nest, and often seems very tame or stupid, allowing itself to be handled or even feigning death.

Unlike other birds, the turkey vulture is a late riser, seldom leaving its roost until an hour after sunrise.