



# Turkey Vulture

## (*Cathartes aura*)

The turkey vulture earned its name for its naked, turkey-like red head. In flight this bird holds its wings in a dihedral, or V-shape. They are often seen “sunning,” where their wings are outstretched towards the sun.

### *Habitat & Diet*

These communal birds roost together in large numbers throughout the US and Mexico, but nest far from each other. These animals are masters of sanitation because their diet is almost exclusively carrion, or dead animals. Even decayed food will be picked clean by these flying garbage disposals.



### *Fascinating Facts*

Turkey vultures are known for their soaring ability. They will ride the warm air currents or thermals, often for hours, saving energy as they search for dead animals. They have the best sense of smell of any bird and can locate rotten food up to eight miles away at a height of 1,000 feet. The turkey vulture’s stomach contains strong enzymes that can break down almost any bacteria known to man. After eating their bacteria filled meal, the turkey vulture will urinate on its legs. The urine serves to disinfect the bird’s feet after it has been standing in a carcass. Their bald head is designed for sanitary eating, without feathers for food to stick to, there is less chance for bacteria to grow. When frightened, this docile bird will simply regurgitate the contents of its last meal, which is enough to frighten off most enemies.

**Height:** 26 to 32 inches  
**Weight:** 6-7 pounds  
**Wingspan:** 6 feet  
**Habitat:** Open country, farmland, & forests  
**Range:** Throughout the US and Mexico  
**Baby:** Chick  
**Group:** Kettle  
**Life Expectancy:** 25 years



### *Status*

The turkey vulture is highly adaptable, and can learn to live in almost any habitat. Their range is expanding northward.



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