

# Spanning the Gap

## Watching "T.V."



U.S. Dept. of the Interior  
National Park Service

*Spanning the Gap*  
The newsletter of  
Delaware Water Gap National  
Recreation Area  
Vol. 14 No. 2 Summer 1992



Ugly...disgusting...filthy...

These are words that have been used to describe a bird that soars high above the ridges of the recreation area. That bird, the turkey vulture (or

*T.V.* as some call it), may or may not deserve such disparagement, depending on one's view, but regardless, this virtuoso soarer of our mountains and valleys plays an important and needed role in the environment.

Commonly seen from March to November throughout the recreation area, especially above the cliffs of Mt. Tammany and Mt. Minsi, the turkey vulture feeds on *carrion*, (dead and rotting meat), and thus helps in the clean-up and removal of disease-carrying animal carcasses from the landscape. Indeed, the scientific name of the turkey vulture, *Cathartes*, is Greek and means *purifier*. Turkey vultures locate their food by sight, but some studies suggest that smell may also be involved -- the turkey vulture is the only North American vulture species that can smell. In fact, in most birds the olfactory sense (*sense of smell*) is not known to be well-developed.



(Above) By adulthood (about two years) a turkey vulture's naked gray head has turned red, and its darkish bill had turned to yellow/white. Shiny black feathers cover the neck. Often white bumps or "tubercles" surround the eyes.



The turkey vulture's taste for carrion and its habit of regurgitating its last meal when threatened may seem disgusting and filthy to us human folk, but actually these behaviors are

adaptations that have helped this feathered garbage-collector survive over the eons. And when it comes to being ugly, well, yes, maybe the t.v. **is** ugly to the human eye. A close look at its beaked, bald head may attest to that. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and if the beholder is another t.v.?



Pale gray feathers line the back length of the underwing, and can show as white flashes on take-off (*above*) and landing (*below*).

In your wanderings in the Recreation Area, keep an eye open for the bird (but do not call it a buzzard; this is a misnomer given by early English settlers.) They are easily identified by their large size, dark plumage, and rocking, soaring and gliding flight, with wings held in a shallow V-position called a *dihedral*. With the aid of binoculars, you may see the distinctive naked red head. The lack of feathers facilitates feeding on messy road-kills and other items that are scavenged.



The turkey vulture is an integral part of the recreation area. Take time out to watch this bird effortlessly soar and glide, a master of the winds, and consider its place in the natural world.

Your appreciation for the bird will grow. Nature writer Edward Abbey's appreciation was such that he wished to be reincarnated as one, to be "serene and soaring ... the humble turkey vulture."

The next time you're watching these aerialists sailing high overhead, think about what you are doing...you are looking *up* to them. Yes, looking up to them.

Turkey vultures deserve at least that.



(Above) Turkey vultures "hang out together," both hunting in small groups and roosting together in large numbers at night. This trio is taking a dim view of traffic on River Road.

(Above, top) Vultures will often be seen in pairs. They mate for life. Males and females have similar coloring.

(Above, middle) A turkey vulture will land a distance away from a possible meal, and approach warily on foot. Though a large and highly aerial raptor, the turkey vulture is at home on the ground, and lays its eggs on the ground with no nest.

(Above, bottom) The slender lines of a turkey vulture in flight. The bird has a wingspan of 5 to 6 feet, roughly a foot less than an eagle.

(Below, left) Over Kittatinny Ridge NJ seen from the top of Mt Minsi PA.

(Below, right) Over Raccoon Ridge NJ.



(Above) Sunbaths are popular, especially in the morning or after a rain shower. These two vultures caught a little sun in a field at Hialeah PA while waiting for morning traffic to clear away from their breakfast.



### Vulture or Eagle?



Many "eagle sightings" in the park are actually sightings of graceful turkey vultures in flight. High in the sky, turkey vultures and golden (or immature bald) eagles both appear as large brownish birds that soar and glide. Even tell-tale markings like the red head of mature vultures can be hard to spot from far away! Some tips to tell the difference between an eagle and a vulture from way down beneath them:

- Turkey vultures typically soar, and usually glide, with their wings raised in a high *dihedral* position. (Right, top, near Shawnee PA) Eagles soar with their wings flat across, or only slightly raised. (Both birds will flap their wings to climb or get more power; bald eagles will flap mostly upward and quite high.)
- The turkey vulture's wings are comparatively narrower from front to back, and the front and back edges are

(Left) Actual silhouettes of birds overhead: the turkey vulture is shown in pink, the bald eagle in blue. Note the shape of the eagle's tail.



more parallel. The back edge is cleaner, with fewer ragged feathers. (*Right, middle, at the Gap*)

- Turkey vultures have pale gray feathers **all along** the back edge of the underside of their wings (*See above for take-off and landing.*) These feathers can catch the sun when the bird is flying. (*Right, bottom, over Arrow Island*).
- The sides of a turkey vulture's tail are nearly parallel in flight. The eagle's tail is more "fan-like" (*See silhouettes above and see feature pages on Eagles.*)
- Bald eagles are very vocal; golden eagles are silent; Turkey vultures can hiss or grunt, but technically are voiceless. If the bird "calls", it is probably a bald eagle.

