



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Turkey vulture

### *Cathartes aura*

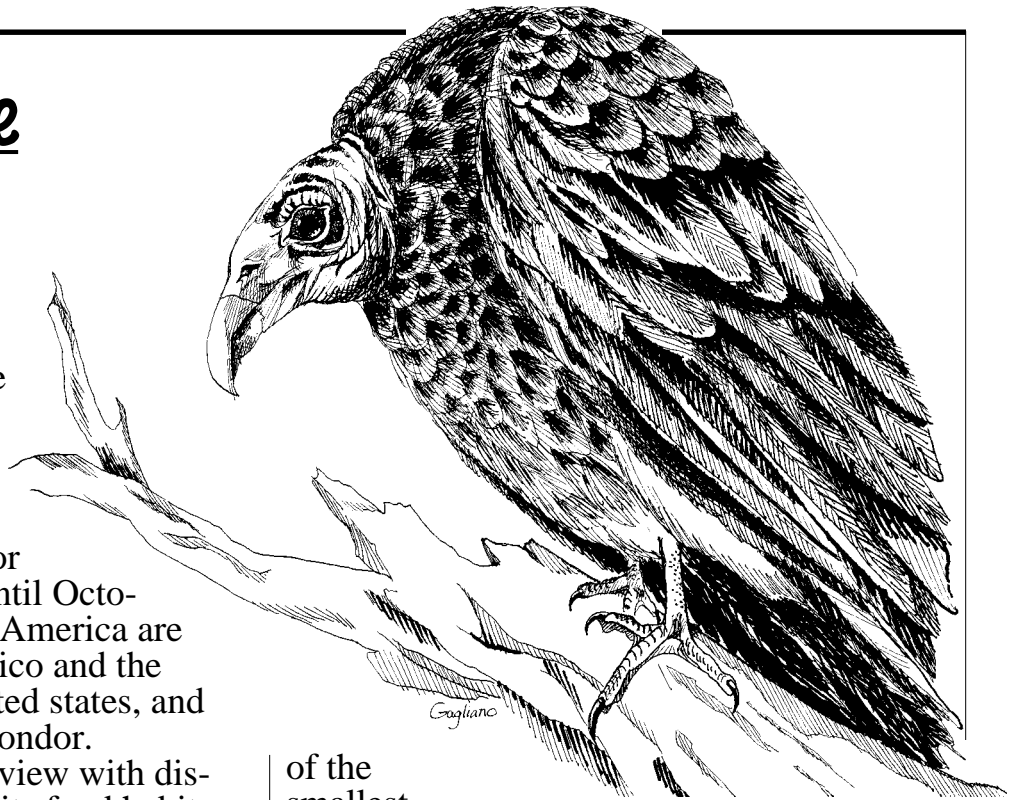
Signs of summer: the song of the cicada, long and warm evenings, sprays of flowers, and the turkey vulture.

The turkey vulture? Yes. This vulture arrives in New Mexico with the warm weather in March or April and usually stays until October. The others in North America are the black vulture, in Mexico and the southern and eastern United states, and the very rare California condor.

The turkey vulture is view with disgust by many because of its food habits. A confirmed carrion eater, the turkey vulture scavenges the roadsides and prairies of the state. Nonetheless, the bird is impressive as it drifts through the sky with a six-foot wingspan. Flight feathers on the wings are lighter-colored than the wing linings, giving the vulture a unique two-tone appearance.

Though its dining habits are less than elegant, the vulture is an expert in using air currents and its physique to find carrion. It must search a great deal of territory to find a dead or dying creature for a meal. The vulture is too big to fly long distances efficiently by flapping its wings. Instead, it lets air currents and its large wingspan work for it. Rising columns of air, called thermals, are particularly useful.

When one bird finds a good thermal and is climbing successfully, other birds often join, and soon the group can be seen circling around a common axis. It behooves the vulture to fly in steady circles



of the smallest diameter, so it can stay near the center of the thermal core where the lift is the strongest. When a height of several hundred meters is attained, the vulture can leave the thermal and glide off, slowly descending, constantly searching the terrain. If a possible meal is sighted, the vulture can reach that point quickly by pouring its efforts into a steep dive. The steeper the angle, the faster the bird travels. He is often able to beat four-footed scavengers to the prey.

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