

The Distribution and Relative Abundance of the Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture in Mexico and Belize, Central America

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INTRODUCTION

The Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture Cathartes burrovianus is the smallest member of the Genus Cathartes. Apart from its smaller size, it differs from the more abundant Turkey Vulture Cathartes aura by the yellowish-orange colour of its head (Wetmore 1964).

The Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture frequents marshy lowland areas from northeastern Mexico southwards along the Caribbean coast of Central America. Because of its habitat preference, and the difficulty in separating it from the Turkey Vulture in the field, its current numerical status and distribution is poorly known. In recent years several field excursions have been made to Mexico and neighbouring Belize to obtain information on these aspects. The present paper, utilizing published and unpublished data, represents a current assessment of the situation in these two countries.

SUMMARY OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Mexico

Historically the Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture occurred as far north as Tampico, in the state of Tamaulipas (Fig. 1). On 19 June 1953 a bird was seen 30 miles north of Tampico and on 21 June 1953 another was sighted some eight miles north of Tampico (Graber 1954). On 11 April 1963 L.R. Wolfe collected two eggs from a Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture nest on the Tamuin River, San Luis Potosi (see footnote). In recent years I have made several trips to the Tampico area but have failed to sight the species. If it does still exist in the area it is now very rare.

Further south, in the state of Veracruz, the species has recently been observed but is not considered to be common. In February 1978 only one bird was recorded during a road census in Veracruz (Ellis et al. 1983). However, the species appears to be relatively more common in southern Veracruz where four birds were recorded at Catemaco during the 1974 Audubon Christmas Bird Count; the results of these counts are published annually in the July issue of American Birds, published by the National Audubon Society, 950 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, U.S.A.. No birds were seen again until the 1978 count when a singleton was observed in the area, but this was not on official count day. An immature bird was collected 18 miles south of Alvarado, Veracruz, by L.R. Wolfe on 23 March 1964 (see footnote); the locality description corresponds to the marshy area adjoining the Rio Paplopan which, being not easily censused without the aid of a boat, has been little studied.

In southern Mexico the Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture is most abundant in western Tabasco, eastern Campeche and northern Chiapas. Its abundance depends, in part, on the month when observations are made. For example, during April 1983 Ed Henckel and I travelled from Villahermosa, Tabasco, to Escarcega, Campeche, and saw only two birds; these were 70 miles south of Escarcega on Highway 186. This same route was travelled in late August 1984 by Steve McGehee and myself and more than 10 birds were observed in the same area as the 1983 sightings. In addition 11 more birds were observed along a side road, from Highway 186 to Palizada. Bill Clark (pers. comm.) stated that, during brief trips to southern Mexico during December 1982 and 1983, numerous Lesser Yellowheaded Vultures were observed near Emiliano Zapata, Chiapas. This area is six miles south of Highway 186 and 31 miles south of the side road to Palizada. Steve McGehee and I travelled, on two occasions, to Zapata in late August 1984 but noted only two birds. Ellis *et al.* (1983) recorded two birds in Campeche during their road census in 1978; their exact route is not known but since they continued on to Belize it is possible that their observations were made in the same areas as those mentioned.

I have no records of the species in the states of Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Several trips were made through these states in May 1983 and August 1984 but no birds were seen. Similarly Dora Weyer (pers. comm.) did not see any Lesser Yellowheaded Vultures during a two week stay in Yucatan during May 1984, but nesting Turkey Vultures were recorded.

Belize

A Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture census was conducted in the northern half of Belize from 15 April to 6 May 1982. The results are shown in Table 1, with the major locations marked on Fig. 1. The largest concentrations were along the muddy shoreline at Crooked Tree Lagoon and, because of the abundance in this area, it was chosen as the site for a 1983 study of the foraging and social behaviour of the species by several members of the Vulture Study Group and Oklahoma City Zoo. With regard to abundance it was determined, by placing observers at various points around the lagoon, that 12-15 Lesser Yellowheaded Vultures were present at the site. Differing greatly from the previous year's count of over 35 vultures, a possible explanation would be the generally dry conditions present in 1983. Dora Weyer (pers. comm.) mentioned that the wetness of the area made travel around the lagoon, by Landrover, nearly impossible in 1984. Throughout the 1983 study the perimeter of the lagoon was travelled frequently and without difficulty. Another possibility could be that the 1983 census was from 7 to 21 May, a month after Weyer's census, and some vultures may have already left the area for their wintering grounds. The number of birds did, in fact, decrease throughout the duration of the study but whether this was due to the generally dry conditions, time of year, or as a result of the noisy disturbance created by the heavy equipment being used to construct a bridge across the lagoon, is not known. Although occasionally a single bird is recorded during the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, the species is generally absent from the country from July until February.

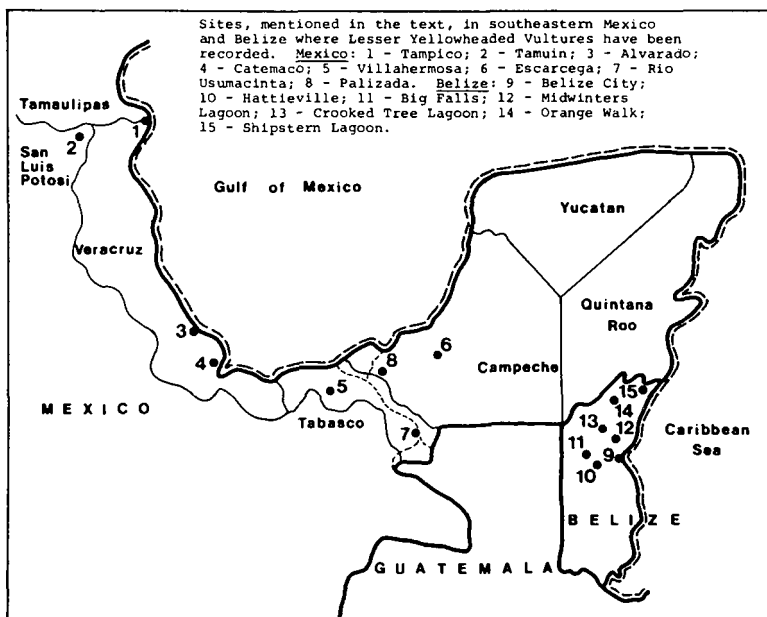
I have no record of the species in southern Belize. The possibility of a population occurring in extreme southern Belize and adjacent Guatemala and Honduras has been suggested but this awaits further investigation.

TABLE 1

CATHARTID VULTURES (EXCLUDING CORAGYPS AND SARCORAMPHUS)
OBSERVED FROM 15 APRIL TO 6 MAY 1984 BY DORA AND DIANE
WEYER IN NORTHERN BELIZE, CENTRAL AMERICA.

Date	Location	Number of individuals of:		
		<u>C. burrovianus</u>	<u>C. aura</u>	<u>C. sp.</u>
15 April	Crooked Tree Lagoon (village area)	2	-	2
16 April	Crooked Tree Lagoon (southern section)	34	23	-
16 April	Western Lagoon	8	1	4
17 April	Crooked Tree Lagoon (western section)	7	2	5
17 April	Orange Walk	2	4	3
22 April	San Esteban Area	1	9	1
24 April	Shipstern Lagoon	1	1	6
2 May	Hattieville	3	9	3
3 May	Crooked Tree Lagoon (village area)	5	-	-
3 May	Alexander Pond	1	-	-
6 May	Big Falls	1	11	-

Figure 1.



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Lesser Yellowheaded Vulture is known to occur, in marshy areas, from northeastern Mexico along the gulf coast to the Caribbean coast of Belize (formerly British Honduras). Recent field studies indicate that a remnant population exists in Veracruz and that the species is seasonally abundant throughout portions of Tabasco, Campeche and Chiapas. The largest concentration yet discovered is along the marshy areas associated with the northern half of the Rio Usumacinta and associated tributaries. Although a complete census of the species in Belize has not yet been carried out, its distribution throughout the northern half of the country is well documented. It is most abundant from late February until July in the north and central portions of the country but has been observed in small numbers throughout the northern half, where favourable habitat exists.

The seasonality of the species in Mexico and Belize would favour the theory that birds from Belize travel west during July and winter in Mexico. The absence of a north-south raptor migration in Belize would further support this theory. The proportion of immature and adult birds in the movement patterns and the possibility of additional populations in areas not yet explored, are considered worthwhile subjects for further study.

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L.R. Wolfe records were extracted from data cards in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Los Angeles, oological collection.