

## A TURKEY BUZZARD ROOST

By FRANK A. LEACH

Buzzard's roosts are such places as the well known scavenger bird, the Turkey Buzzard, or Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura septentrionalis*), selects and habitually makes use of for passing the night. Although during the day these vultures seem to pursue their hunt for carrion food independently of one another, and are seldom seen in greater number than two, three, or four, unless some large carcass has been discovered, when the day's feeding is over and it comes time to prepare for the night they display a remarkably gregarious habit. A place is selected in a heavy growth of timber, and there the birds congregate and roost among the tree-tops for the night. Once a roosting place has been chosen, it continues to be the nightly resort of the buzzards, not only night after night, but year after year.

How much interference with the coming of the big birds, or the presence of humans in the vicinity of the roosts, it would require to cause an abandonment of the chosen places, is an open question, as will be noted by statements to follow. Another unsettled feature of the roosting habit of the vultures is the extent of territory supplied by one roost. It must be considerable, judging from the fact that in and about the neighborhood of the roost there are times when not a single buzzard can be seen, and miles from the place can be traveled without sight of one. Yet, with the closing of the day, these most graceful flyers come soaring in to the chosen spot, at times singly, but more commonly in two's, or three's, or in even greater numbers, and frequently at such heights that they appear but little more than specks in the sky. As I have seen but one roost, and have not found any Pacific Coast literature bearing on the subject, I am unable to give the average number of vultures constituting the night colonies. However, the roost I am about to describe has as its maximum number about thirty. Another peculiar feature in the habits of the birds is that they seek for nesting purposes rough, rocky places, difficult of access, away from the roosting center. The nest may be placed in a small cave, recess, or hollow stump, but wherever it may be, it is most securely located with minimum chances of being disturbed.

Although I have been interested in all kinds of birds and their habits from boyhood days here in California, it was never my fortune to discover a buzzard's roost until four years ago. Then, as now, I was living at the Mount Diablo Country Club, situated at the base of the southwestern flank of Mount Diablo. The club grounds embrace several hundred acres of land. On the extreme western limit of these grounds there is a grove of large eucalyptus trees. Until about five years ago they were so isolated from any of the activities of the club that the place was seldom visited; but in 1923 the club extended its golf course so that one of its greens and connecting fairways were located along the north side of the grove of eucalyptus, and as a consequence thereafter the locality was seldom without the presence of golf players or workmen tending the golf course. In the year prior, on the opposite side of the grove, a large gang of men with teams of horses and excavation appliances were engaged for several months in constructing a large reservoir.

Very soon after the golfers began to use this new part of the course it was reported to me that some Turkey Buzzards were nesting in the grove. An investigation failed to reveal any nests, but did develop the fact that here was a real Buzzard's roost, which seemed to be the night quarters for about thirty of the birds. The conditions about the grove had been so changed, as detailed in the foregoing paragraph, that I thought it probable the buzzards would now be so disturbed that they would abandon the place and seek new roosting quarters, of greater seclusion. But four years

have come and gone with no change in the popularity of the grove as a roosting place, with little or no change in the number of lodgers. The number seems to vary in that there appear to be fewer in the late spring and summer months than in the fall and winter, which might be accounted for by absence of breeding birds.

It is an interesting sight to watch the coming in of the vultures in the late afternoons and in the early evenings. In the winter months I have seen their flight begin as early as half past two in the afternoon, though this was on a stormy day. In the period of lengthened days the flight begins from four-thirty to five P. M. I am unable to say how late it continues; for with the approach of sundown the numerous mosquitoes make a late watch of the place too uncomfortable. Ordinarily the buzzards come sailing in on motionless wings, at high altitude, as if coming from a distance. When over the grove or roosting place, they begin to soar in circles of graceful flight. Sometimes they soon spiral down and hunt out a suitable or favorite tree branch for a resting place; then again they will remain overhead for an indefinite length of time soaring at different levels, so that occasionally they appear as mere specks. On a recent visit to the grove I watched a group of three buzzards that came in and swung around a time or two over the trees, just clearing the tops; then the two began an upward spiral flight lasting until they had passed out of sight. The seeming absence of any benefit or useful purpose to accrue to the birds by such flights leaves but one explanation for them, and that is they must be excursions for the enjoyment of their wonderful wing powers. No other bird surpasses the ease, grace and charm of the movements of the vultures, when soaring high in the air on motionless wings with graceful dips, spirals and circles. As Blanchan says, it suggests the "very poetry of motion."

At times three or four birds, after having lit in the trees and seemingly settled down for the night, would take to wing and indulge in one of these flights; but more commonly when the incoming birds once found their roosting place they remained there with but little shifting of position, though with occasional disputes over the possession of a choice branch.

Though there are several hundred trees in the grove, and one tree appears as good as another for the use that the buzzards put them to, the birds confine their nightly occupation to a certain group of half a dozen trees. If the near presence of golfers and workmen were objectionable, the birds, by changing the roost to the southern part of the grove, could regain a place of isolation and thus avoid the trouble. Apparently this is a matter of indifference with them. Even last summer and fall when workmen were employed in chopping down and cutting up into firewood about twenty trees, some of which were within 125 yards of the roost, there was no apparent disturbance of roosting habits of the colony.

The departure of the buzzards from the roost in the morning is not a sudden or hasty action. On the contrary the taking off in search for their food for the day is a very deliberate proceeding, by one, two, three or more birds at a time. This movement ordinarily begins with sunrise and may continue for nearly an hour, or until the last of the flock has taken the air. It requires but a few flops of their wings for the vultures to rise from and clear the branches, and then, as a rule, instead of sailing off in direct flight in some particular direction, they soar about the vicinity, frequently spiraling to a great height, where they sail round and round with the least seeming effort, and as in the evenings, apparently for the pure enjoyment of it. While soaring round in their graceful flights, the birds drift off in some chosen direction until they pass out of sight.

It is not uncommon to see the birds raise their wings partially opened, holding them in that position for several minutes before taking flight, and then again it is not

unusual to see birds that had taken flight, return to the roost as if to get a more satisfactory start for the day.

According to my recollections, Turkey Buzzards were more commonly seen, or existed in greater numbers, in the early days of the settlement of California than now. A far greater number of cattle and horses occupied the grazing lands, and death among the animals was of sufficient frequency to keep these birds supplied with food. In the later 50's, in the central and northern parts of the state, it was not uncommon also to see the great Condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*) associated with flocks of a dozen or more buzzards, feeding on the remains of a dead horse or steer. I frequently saw them between the years of 1857 and 1860 on the bare hills of lower Napa Valley. They were so much larger than the buzzards that there was no trouble in distinguishing one from the other. Generally where there was a flock of the smaller birds gathered about a carcass, there would be two or three of the big Condors. It is my impression that after 1859 or 1860 the latter were seldom seen, in the Napa section at least; and I think the extinction of the Condor in northern California took place in the decade following 1860. The Turkey Buzzards, however, are still with us, and likely to remain as long as food conditions continue as favorable as at the present time. Should a change for the worse take place, it is doubtful if they, like their smaller relative, the Black Vulture of South and Central America, would take to a city life, and become scavengers of back-yards and depositories of garbage.

*Diablo, California, July 24, 1928.*