

J. Raptor Res. 22(3):91

© 1988 The Raptor Research Foundation, Inc.

NOCTURNAL FLIGHT BY TURKEY VULTURES (*Cathartes aura*) IN SOUTH-CENTRAL TEXAS

STEPHEN P. TABOR AND CHRIS T. MCALLISTER

Large flocks of Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) typically gather before nightfall on a single open roost after searching for carrion during the day (Chase 1982). L. Griscom (in Bent 1937) noted that "the vulture is a late riser, seldom being on the wing until an hour after sunrise." The following account describes an episode of nocturnal flight by Turkey Vultures.

On 28 September 1985 at 2200 H (CDT) in Real County, Texas, 18.6 km NE of Leahey (elevation 625 m) along Silver Creek, a tributary of the East Frio River, we observed 12 Turkey Vultures gliding, soaring and spiraling in characteristic fashion at a height of ca 61 m. Meteorological conditions were: 27°C, full moon, slightly cloudy-overcast sky, intermittent, misty rain, ground wind speed SE 15–20 mph. The birds remained above us for 15–20 min before flying off in a northwesterly direction. As the vultures flew to the NW, we climbed to the top of an adjacent ridge and, with the aid of binoculars, watched the birds fly completely out of visual range (visual conditions were excellent due to the full moon) and away from the river and its tributaries.

The above observation may represent an unprovoked case of nocturnal flying by Turkey Vultures. On the other hand, it is possible that the birds could have been disturbed from a riverside roost and were simply taking the prevailing SE winds away to the NW. However, we believe this is an unlikely explanation due to the following reasons: Prior to dusk, we observed some Turkey Vultures lighting in trees on a roost situated above the river. This roost site was located on the edge of a sheer bluff overlooking the river valley below. It is unlikely that the birds were disturbed by human or other intrusion in such an inaccessible location. The following morning at dawn, we again observed the birds at a roost (ca 2 km from our original observation post). Because the birds were not marked or followed through the night continually, we can only assume that they are the same ones we observed flying at night, as we are quite familiar with the study site and surrounding area.

Alternatively, the vultures may have been flying at night to exploit thermals, the sufficient lighting from the full moon or other favorable environmental factors. As pointed out by Kendeigh (1934) and reiterated by Moore (1945), additional information needs to be obtained about the night habits of birds.

Although the time of year and location are appropriate, this event was probably not a case of nocturnal migration (K. A. Arnold, pers. comm.). Neither the related Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) nor other New World vultures, are known to migrate at night (Eisenmann 1963). Oberholser (1974) reported that Turkey Vulture autumnal migratory trips in Texas are carried out entirely diurnally, over a period of 2 wks. In California, Turkey Vultures migrate for a period lasting over 3 mos (96–111 d) from September through November (Binford 1979). However, in Arkansas, Turkey Vultures are still present through mid-December (McAllister, unpubl. observ.) and may not represent birds migrating in from other localities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank K. A. Arnold, C. D. Fisher, and E. L. Hanebrink, for providing information regarding the habits of vultures and J. Coleman, J. R. Parrish, P. Rabenold, G. Warrick, B. Zoellick, and an anonymous referee, for critically reviewing the manuscript. We also appreciate the hospitality of K. Cave, who allowed us to stay at the H. E. Butt Foundation Camp.

LITERATURE CITED

- BENT, A. C. 1937. Life histories of North American birds of prey. Part I. *Bull. U.S. Nat. Mus.* No. 167.
- BINFORD, L. C. 1979. Fall migration of diurnal raptors at Pt. Diablo, California. *West. Birds* 10:1–6.
- CHASE, A. M. 1982. Choice of roost sites for the night by Turkey Vultures. *Bull. N.J. Acad. Sci.* 27:26.
- EISENMANN, E. 1963. Is the Black Vulture migratory? *Wilson Bull.* 75:244–249.
- KENDEIGH, S. C. 1934. The role of environment in the life of birds. *Ecol. Monogr.* 4:299–417.
- MOORE, A. D. 1945. Winter night habits of birds. *Wilson Bull.* 57:253–260.
- OBERHOLSER, H. C. 1974. The bird life of Texas. Vol I. Univ. Texas Press, Austin.

Rt. 3, 909 Stella Mae Dr., Burleson, Texas 76028. Address of second author: Department of Biological Sciences, North Texas State University, Denton, TX 76203. Present address of first author: 3620 Caldwell, Bakersfield, CA 93309.

Received 6 January 1988; accepted 1 June 1988