

# The Much Maligned Cathartes aura

*[That's 'buzzard' to the rest of us]*

First off, in the United States, when someone refers to a buzzard, it means a turkey vulture, a member of the New World vultures. Elsewhere in the world, a buzzard is in the same family as Old World vultures – Accipitridae.

So, OK, the buzzard (turkey vulture) is a scavenger and feeds almost exclusively on carrion. But, its bad reputation comes straight from Hollywood. Whenever we see buzzards flying around, we know that the Apaches have just wiped out another cavalry unit.

It's a scavenger, but scavengers certainly have their place in the grand scheme of things wrought by Mother Nature. It finds its food using its keen eyes and sense of smell, flying low enough to detect the gases produced by the beginnings of the process of decay in dead animals. In flight, it uses thermals to move through the air, flapping its wings infrequently. It roosts in large community groups. Lacking a syrinx—the vocal organ of birds—its only vocalizations are grunts or low hisses. It nests in caves, hollow trees, or thickets. Each year it generally raises two chicks, which it feeds by regurgitation. It has very few natural predators. In the United States, it actually receives legal protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey\\_vulture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey_vulture)]

The turkey vulture is in the same family as the California Condor and the black vulture, which lives primarily in the south and southeast portions of the U.S. Its scientific name is *Cathartes aura* which is Latin for "cleansing breeze". [*See? Doesn't that sound nice?*]

Like all other vultures, the turkey vulture has a bald head. This is so that bits of carrion (dead meat) do not adhere to the skin as they would to feathers. It was given its common name due to its superficial resemblance to the Wild Turkey. At close range, the naked red heads of the adult turkey vultures resemble those of turkeys, hence the name. Juveniles have pinkish black heads.

Turkey vultures are the only scavenger birds that can't kill their prey. A close inspection of their feet reminds one of a chicken instead of a hawk or an eagle.

Their feet are useless for ripping into prey, but the vultures have powerful beaks that can tear through even the toughest cow hide. They feed by thrusting their heads into the body cavities of rotting animals. Turkey vultures have been known to be able to smell carrion from over a mile away which is very unique in the bird world. The turkey vulture has the largest olfactory (smelling) system of all birds. [<http://kern.audubon.org/tvfacts.htm>]

So, the next time you see some buzzards, give them a little respect please.



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