

LOOK ALIVE

I have a history of odd and memorable conversations with complete strangers, people who for some reason deem me worthy to receive their confidences. One of these was a campground host at Mark Twain State Park in Missouri who, in the course of selling me a bundle of firewood, also chose to share the details of her recent battle with cancer. "Last year at this time I had two lungs and now I only have one" was her startling opening gambit, apropos of absolutely nothing, except perhaps the simple burning urgency of her gratitude at being alive to tell the tale.

Perhaps I flatter myself that she hand-picked me to hear her story. It's entirely possible that every single camper who came to buy wood was also the recipient of this revelation, for she bore all the stigmas of a topic-hopping marathon talker, a skill with which I am quite familiar thanks to my maternal grandmother, whose nickname was Hurricane Norva. The woman's next subject, embarked upon without any semblance of a transition, was vultures. "Turkey vultures are kind of ugly up close," she remarked, "but they sure are graceful and beautiful when they're up in the air...you hardly ever see them flap their wings."

Not until recently, some six years down the road from this conversation, have I come to recognize the remarkable connection between the topic of mortality and the subject of turkey vultures. Now, every time I see a vulture skillfully surfing the thermals, lazily gliding on a convenient updraft, I feel grateful to be among the living, and I say as much to the passing bird, my fists upraised as I shout, "I'M ALIVE!" In other words, look elsewhere for your next meal.

This is one of those topics not likely to be broached in polite company, steeped as it is in death, decay and outright putrefaction. The six-or-so-pound turkey vulture is an extraordinarily efficient sanitation engineer, the ultimate recycler, a valuable undertaker without whose services we would be knee-deep in the odoriferous and disease-ridden carcasses of dead animals. That turkey vultures exist to fill this niche is witness to the genius of creation. Although they are considered a bird of prey, these birds are never a threat to living creatures; their dining pleasure focuses exclusively on the recently deceased. Nevertheless, turkey vultures are more discriminating than you might think. They like their meat fairly fresh, not too putrid, and possibly with a little salad of greens and berries on the side. And just as humans do, vultures distinctly prefer eating herbivores over carnivores, because vegetarians just plain taste better. Turkey vultures are also, incidentally, among the very few North American birds with a well-developed sense of smell, which seems a design detail of somewhat dubious value, since the odor of their next meal is hardly subtle.



If you've the stomach for it, the adaptive design of a turkey vulture is fascinating. If not, skip to the next paragraph. The reason this bird has a featherless, bare-naked, flaming-as-a-baboon's-butt head is to prevent accumulation of the bacteria-laden residues that a feathered head would collect in the course of harvesting tidbits from the interior of a decaying carcass. The excreta of the vulture is so acidic that it functions as a natural sanitizer; the birds deliberately defecate on their own feet and legs after standing on their dinners, which serves the dual purpose of killing microbes and promoting evaporative

cooling. Their stomachs contain digestive acids that kill virtually all bacteria and viruses, allowing them to derive their nourishment from meat that would otherwise be unfit for consumption. The single defense that turkey vultures have against attackers is extremely crude but effective: they

are able on command to regurgitate their last meal, which was pretty awful to begin with, but after partial digestion is vile beyond description and corrosive to boot. *Splat! Take that!*

For all this bird's useful and redeeming qualities as a member of the food chain (albeit at the lower end), for all its value to the natural world and, really, to the civilized world, it would seem that the poor turkey vulture has been given little by way of endearing qualities. If you were the designer,



wouldn't you think to give a dirty-job bird like the turkey vulture the melodious voice of a meadowlark, or the compensatory cuteness of a chickadee, even perhaps the eye-catching colors of a blue jay? Instead, the vulturous vocabulary consists of unattractive primordial hisses and grunts. The mottled brown-black birds roost in ominous groups among the trees or sit in sinister solitude on abandoned barns or cattle pens displaying their six-foot wingspans as they wait for the

sun to bake the dew and bacteria from their feathers. Frankly, they bear an uncomfortable resemblance to dark-suited funeral directors waiting for customers.

From all accounts on the ground, this bird has been seriously short-changed; it is merely serviceable rather than spectacular. But, oh, when it takes to the sky! Then you see the gift the Creator gave to this otherwise humble, homely bird. Once the morning air has warmed sufficiently, the turkey vulture launches upward in search of the perfect thermal, a pocket of warm air on the rise. Hang gliders would sell their souls to know all the secrets a turkey vulture knows about hitchhiking on a current of air. Once a vulture catches a wave, it relaxes into the grace of the sky, allowing itself to be carried upward in lazy circles, mounting to the crest of the thermal and then dramatically diving through thin air, losing altitude at speeds near 60 miles an hour without a single worried wag of the wing, until the bird captures yet another buoyant wave of warm air and begins the upward surge again. On a good day, a turkey vulture can ride the skies for over six hours straight without flapping its wings; it is one of the most skillful gliders in the world, migrating across continents with minimal expenditures of energy. While a group of vultures is called a *venue*, a venue of vultures skillfully circling on thermals is also referred to as a *kettle* for its resemblance to a see-through cauldron of swirling, percolating birds. There is absolutely no practical purpose to this sky-dancing—it has nothing to do with prospecting for vittles. It would seem that the gift of effortless flight has been given purely for pleasure, or perhaps, for perspective.



The turkey vulture's Latin name, *Cathartes aura*, roughly translates as *luminous purifier*. This nomenclature rather neatly unifies the vulture's dual nature as both earthy scavenger and graceful master of the sun-spangled skies, elevating it to the esteemed position it holds in ancient mythologies. In one creation story, the vulture once possessed a majestic crown of feathers, but sacrificed them forevermore by valiantly volunteering to fly up and push the sun farther away from earth in order to save the other animals from unbearable heat. The fox and opossum were the first two unsuccessful volunteers, which accounts for why the inside of a fox's mouth is black and an opossum has a hairless tail. To the Pueblo Indians, this bird's medicine was useful for grounding, purification and restoration of harmony. An old-timer will tell you that the annual return of the turkey vulture is a sign that crops are safe from a hard frost; the birds return when the warmth of the sun is sufficient to assure their buoyancy.

According to the Greeks, the vulture was a descendant of the griffin, a mythical beast symbolizing the dualities of good and evil, spirit and flesh, sky and earth. In Egyptian traditions, the vulture was a maternal symbol credited with the power to transform death into life, the keeper of the endless cycles of death and rebirth, the magical bird who could transubstantiate diseased and decaying matter into life-giving sustenance.

I don't expect my path will ever cross that of the one-lunged campground host again, but if it does, I will say *now I understand*. What I mean is that I understand how she could talk about cancer in one breath and turkey vultures in the next. Life on the ground, like the turkey vulture, can be downright ugly—it is so often overshadowed by haunting malignancies, diseases that corrupt the flesh, the maggot in the meat, the worm in the bud. But when I awaken alive each morning, there is good reason to give thanks. I spread my wings in salutation to the sun and await that gift from the lighter side of life, a little thermal of joy that tugs my spirit upward and invites me to rise into the grace of an aerial perspective.