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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Cathartidae (American Vultures)

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FAMILY CATHARTIDAE (AMERICAN VULTURES)



Turkey Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

Breeding Status: Breeds from eastern New Mexico, the Texas panhandle, and most of Oklahoma, southern Colorado, and northward across eastern Kansas, becoming progressively less common and generally restricted to the deeper river valleys and wooded canyons such as the Pine Ridge area of Nebraska, the Black Hills of South Dakota, and the North Dakota Badlands. Breeds rarely in north-central Minnesota (*Loon* 49:87).

Breeding Habitat: At the northern part of its range, this species is associated with brushy woodlands adjoining more open grasslands or croplands, but farther south the birds have a more general distribution. Areas providing thermal updrafts or declivity winds along cliffs or mountains are favored for foraging, and the cliffs also provide nest cavities.

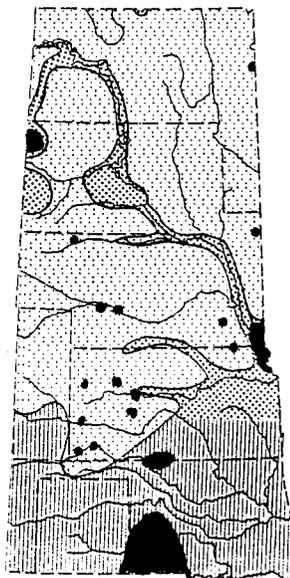
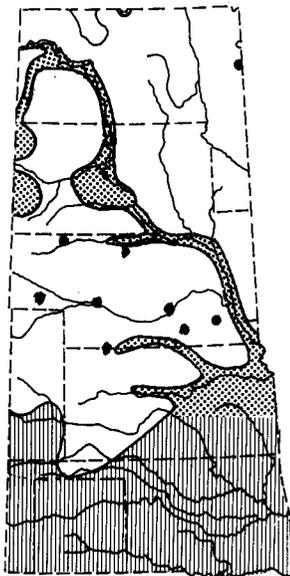
Nest Location: In the northern areas, cliff overhangs, rocky cavities, and even badger holes have reportedly been used for nesting, while farther south the birds often nest in bank hollows, caves, and tree cavities or among rocks. The nest sites are always dark and well concealed, and sometimes the birds nest in abandoned buildings. No actual nest is constructed; the eggs are simply laid on the substrate.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Usually 2 eggs, rarely 1 or 3. The eggs are dull to creamy white with various-sized spots and blotches of pale and brighter brown. The incubation period lasts 38–41 days. Single-brooded.

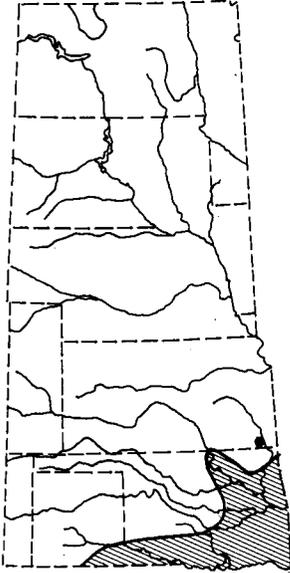
Time of Breeding: Kansas egg records are for the period April 21 to June 10, and the peak of egg-laying is probably about May 1. Oklahoma egg dates are from April 28 to June 20, and young have been seen there from May 9 to July 4.

Breeding Biology: Turkey vultures are monogamous, but little is known of their pairing behavior or their age of sexual maturity. However, the nests are well scattered even where nest sites are restricted, and the pair often uses a cave or other possible nest site as a roost for some time before laying their eggs there. Both sexes participate in incubation, and the incubating bird usually takes morning and afternoon breaks to preen and sit in the sunshine. Injury-feigning at the nest has been reported, and young birds will often disgorge their food or bite when approached. The young are relatively precocial and soon move to the mouth of the nesting cavity to sun themselves. The fledging period is surprisingly long, from 70 to 80 days.

Suggested Reading: Coles 1944; Brown and Amadon 1968.



Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*



Breeding Status: Now confined as a breeding species to eastern Oklahoma and adjacent Texas. Formerly bred in southeastern Kansas, but there is only a single old nesting record, from Labette County.

Breeding Habitat: Black vultures are mostly confined to tropical and subtropical areas, in both wooded and semiopen country, and in particular concentrate in areas where garbage or offal is plentiful.

Nest Location: Nests are in sites similar to those used by turkey vultures, such as caves, dense thickets, and hollow trees. They rarely nest more than 15 feet above the ground and sometimes use low cliffs that have eroded recesses. Sometimes nests are close together, especially where nest sites are limited. The eggs are simply deposited on the ground; no actual nest is built, but loose materials are accumulated in the general vicinity of the eggs.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Usually 2 eggs, occasionally 1 or 3. The eggs are pale grayish green to whitish, usually with spots or blotches of brown on the larger end. The incubation period is 32-39 days starting with the last egg. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Oklahoma egg records are from April 15 to June, and young have been reported from June (unfledged) to July 6 (fully fledged). In Texas, eggs have been reported from January 28 to July 29, and dependent young from April 4 to August 21.

Breeding Biology: Black vultures are monogamous, presumably permanently. Courtship chases and diving through the air have been reported, and males have also been seen strutting with outstretched wings near females. The eggs are laid at intervals of a day or two. They are incubated equally by both sexes, by being placed between the toes and thus aligned side by side and parallel with the body's axis. After hatching the young are brooded almost continuously for several weeks and are fed by letting them take regurgitated food from the parents' open mouths. By 80 days they can fly short distances, and they leave the nest after about 90 days.

Suggested Reading: Stewart 1974; Brown and Amadon 1968.