

[From Spring 2000]

Bad Rep Raptors

One sunny morning, while bicycling through the countryside, I came to a bend in the road. Tree branches hanging over the pavement provided cool shade and an unexpected surprise. Splat, Splat! Whew, what luck, I thought to myself as I steered clear of the smelly mess that landed right beside me. Above, I heard the sound of wings beating as one slightly irritated turkey vulture took off from his roost.

Now, you might be wondering, from which end of the bird did this concoction exit? A vulture has the habit of vomiting on predators, and its aim can be accurate. Why throw up on your enemies? It's a good way to gain time to escape from a life-threatening situation. The bird reduces weight instantly by emptying its crop (an enlarged area in the esophagus for storing food). After shedding a few ounces, the vulture has an easier time taking off.

How strange I must have looked to that startled bird. Good thing that the enemy, was a moving target.

There's something fascinating about these homely birds. No doubt, sometime during your childhood you heard that human babies magically arrive by stork mail. According to Appalachian folklore, they hatch from eggs laid by vultures in hollow logs.

Actually, vultures do nest in stumps, deserted buildings, abandoned hawk nests, and cliffs. If you have rotting stumps, dead trees or an old building on your property, think twice before destroying them. What looks like -an eyesore to you, might be a palace to these harmless birds.



Who can resist watching vultures kettling or gliding along on rising warm air currents. Such grace is enough to make you forget how ugly and awkward they look up close. Their large body size and wide wings help vultures maneuver through the air with the greatest of ease. They ride thermals or updrafts which develop where air heats up quickly. That's why vultures are often seen circling above fields instead of forests or water. Of course, if there's a meal nearby, they can be seen just about anywhere.

Vultures' lives are never-ending scavenger hunts. Nature has provided vultures with keen eyesight to find carrion, and bald heads to allow them to eat without soiling feathers. Turkey vultures have a good sense of smell to help them locate scrumptious tidbits, whereas black vultures must rely on good vision.

Thanks to vultures, our highways are cleaner. Road crews probably appreciate their assistance. Maybe the birds too should be provided with orange vests!

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