

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*



Folk Name: Buzzard, Carrion Bird, Buzzut, Crookwinged Vulture

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Forage almost anywhere. Nest in sheltered cavities in old outbuildings, forests, ledges.

The Turkey Vulture is a permanent resident in the Carolina Piedmont. Individuals move about some during the year, and like the Black Vulture, numbers possibly increase in the fall when birds move down from the North. Our highest one-day counts were about 320 birds tallied on the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count in 1999 and almost 270 counted on the York CBC in 1995.

In July 1891, *The Maxton Union* newspaper in Maxton, NC, proclaimed that Turkey Vultures could “smell food 40 miles away.” This was more than a bit of an exaggeration, like many newspaper accounts of the day. However, both vultures rely upon their keen sight and their ultra-sensitive sense of smell to find dead animals. In fact, scientists determined the olfactory organ of the Turkey Vulture was the ninth largest of 108 species of birds studied, and in experiments relying only upon their sense of smell, this vulture was able to find concealed carcasses within 2 days of death. Turkey Vultures are more solitary than Black Vultures and generally eat smaller animals including prey as small as squirrels and snakes.

The Turkey Vulture was considered an abundant permanent resident in the region prior to the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1940s it was considered common, and, by the 1960s, it had become “rather uncommon.” Today, it is fairly common to common once



again throughout the region.

We have several historic nest records of note. Wildlife photographer Jack Dermid found a Turkey Vulture nest in Gaston County on May 4, 1940. The nest was “under a large boulder on ground” and it held one egg. Elmer Brown found a Turkey Vulture nest in Davidson containing two eggs on May 7, 1940. The eggs were placed in a cavity at the base of a “large oak tree on sparsely-wooded hillside.” One of the eggs had been broken and appeared to be about 2–3 days from hatching. The following year on May 3, 1941, in Anson County, W.H. Boyce entered a deserted house and found a Turkey Vulture nest with two eggs placed on the open floor about 14 inches above the ground. Turkey Vulture eggs take several weeks to hatch, and the young take almost two months to fledge.

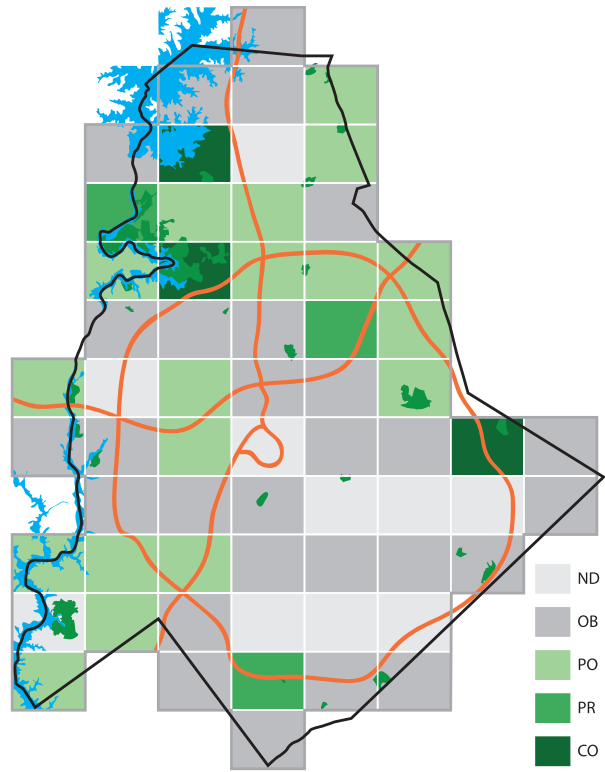


Turkey Vulture nest. (Kevin Metcalf)



Turkey Vultures preening. (John Scavetto)

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers confirmed three Turkey Vulture nest sites during the study. Each of these sites was in an old, unused building in the woods. Kevin Metcalf photographed two eggs on April 15, 2010, in an old outbuilding on the Stephen's Farm on Cashion Road in Cornelius.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/3, CO/3)