

Species Sheets: Turkey Vulture



photo by Milo Burcham ©

Common name: Turkey Vulture

Latin Name: *Cathartes aura*

Field Marks: Length 27 inches
Wing span 69 inches



Large brownish-black bird with head and neck bare of feathers. Head on adults red, juveniles gray. In flight hold wings in dihedral, or upward in a shallow V. Usually seen soaring, or sometimes on perches like fence posts, holding wings open to the morning sun.

Although included here in traditional order, due to recent DNA research, Turkey Vultures are no longer considered to be raptors, but instead usually classified in Order Ciconiiformes, along with storks and herons.

Habitat:

Open country such as farmlands and deserts, and woodlands bordering such habitat. Common in north only during warmer months because only then are thermals, or updrafts, present, and food isn't frozen.

Behavior:

Feeds almost entirely on carrion, or dead animals, usually medium- and large-sized mammals. Head is bare of feathers for this reason – to keep clean. Road kill is easily found. Very tolerant of toxic bacteria that other animals won't eat, but if meat is too rotten will not feed. May roost in large groups.

Nest and eggs:

Uses caves, cliffs, and hollow logs or stumps with little or no nest material added. Sometimes on ground in dense undergrowth. Usually 2 eggs laid. Parent birds regurgitate food from the crop to feed young, unlike true raptors.

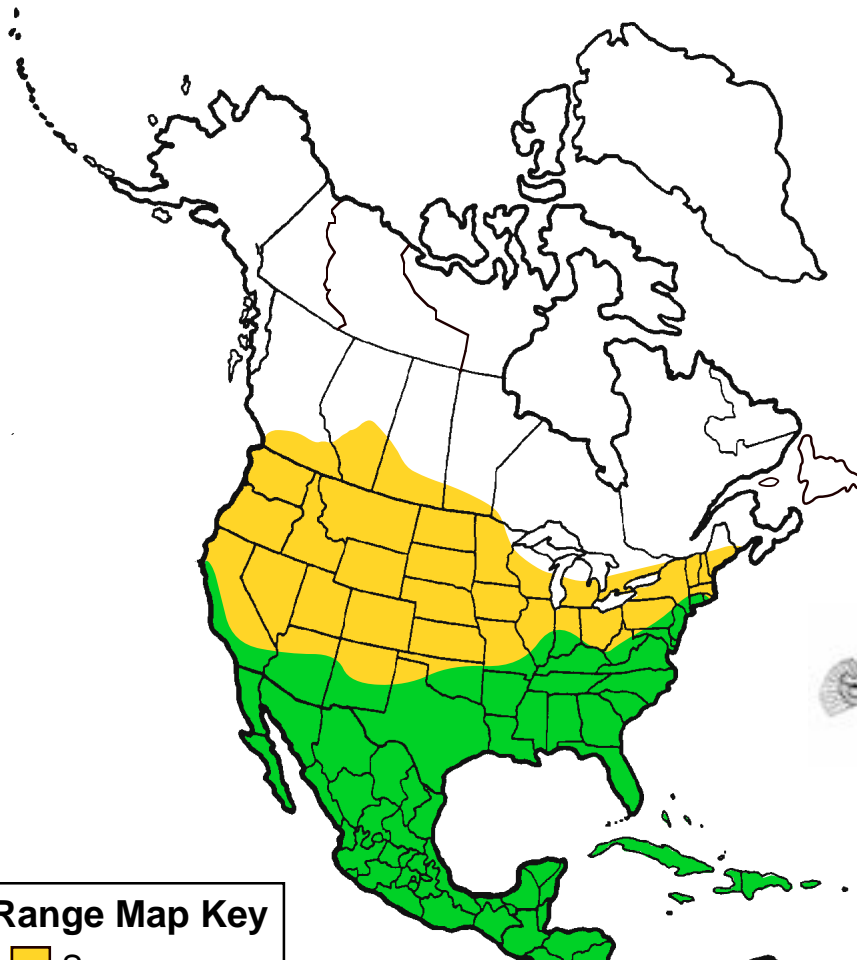
Movement:

Northern and western birds migratory, some travelling to South America.

Interesting Fact:

Turkey Vultures are among the few birds with a well-developed sense of smell. May locate carcasses from the odor. Gas pipeline companies may locate a break in the line by pumping in a bad smelling chemical then watching where the Turkey Vultures collect, so these birds are helpful in these situations. More important, they clean up the wildlands and roadways. These vultures were mistakenly called "buzzards", a term that more accurately refers to buteo hawks in the Eastern Hemisphere.

Range Map: Turkey Vulture



Turkey Vulture. Copyright © Milo Burcham



Raptors of the Rockies

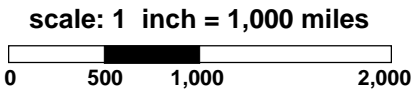


Montana Audubon

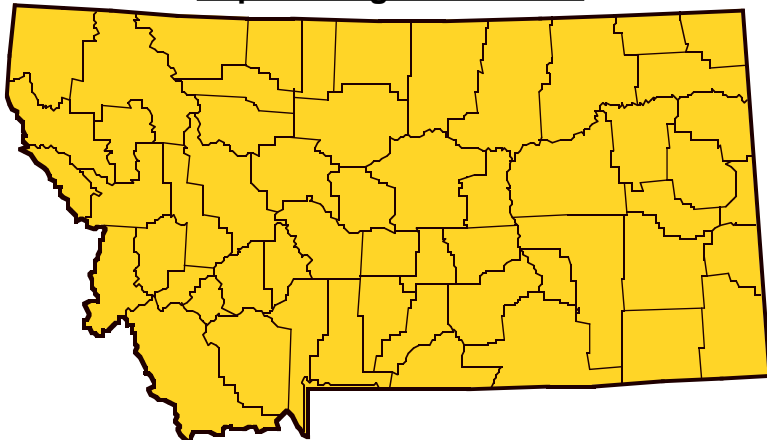
These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

Range Map Key

- Summer
- Year-round
- Winter



Raptor Range in Montana



Montana range maps are based on the Montana Bird Distribution data.