



Volume 26

January, 1960

Number 5

TURKEY VULTURE, AN EXPERT SOARER
Ernest J. Willoughby

The Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) is a well-known bird throughout the southwestern United States and is noted for its mastery of the art of soaring. In this article I shall describe some of its aerial accomplishments and some of the techniques it uses in soaring.

The Turkey Vulture is a large bird, about 30 inches long with a wingspan of about 6 feet. It is very dark brown, appearing black at a distance, and is recognized by the silvery-grey undersurface of the primary and secondary wing feathers which contrasts noticeably with the dark wing lining. The head is relatively tiny and naked, red in adults and dusky in young. The ivory bill of the adult can sometimes be seen in good light as it contrasts with the plumage of a low-flying bird. The characteristic dihedral angle of the wings and rocking of the bird in a wind are good long-range field marks.

Being a scavenger, the Turkey Vulture depends on a method of flight which allows it to cover a maximum of territory with a minimum of effort, namely the utilization of thermals (rising columns of warm air) and upward-deflected air currents to stay aloft. Many times I have seen a vulture or two come gliding low over hills or houses feeling for thermals. When a bird finds one it immediately begins to circle tightly to stay within the rising column and quickly gains altitude. Eventually when the thermal has petered out or the bird feels it is high enough, it reduces its wing area slightly and planes off in a straight line, gradually losing altitude until it strikes another thermal or finds a slope with a convenient up-draft, when it repeats the performance.

When soaring, the outermost primary wing feathers of the vulture spread widely like fingers, leaving considerable space between them. It is thought that these primaries when thus spread act somewhat as the slots in the leading edge of an airplane's wings in preventing the wing tips from losing life and control at low air-speeds. Their use can be seen when a vulture is circling in a breeze, for as the bird wheels around into the wind it closes the gaps between the primaries and when it comes downwind it spreads them wide as if compensating for the alternately increased and decreased airspeed.

The marked dihedral angle of the wings of a soaring vulture is an automatic stabilizing mechanism allowing the vulture to glide on an even keel with a minimum of effort, for as the vulture rocks to one side, lift on the lower wing automatically increases while that of the higher wing decreases. This occurs because, as the bird descends through the air (though not necessarily descending with relation to the

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 THE WESTERN Tanager

Free to members...Others \$1.50 annually
 Editor Emeritus.....George T. Hastings
 Editor.....Hubert H. Weiser
 3749 Shannon Road, L.A. 27....NO 4-2753

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 Organized 1910..... Incorporated 1951
 "To promote the study and protection of
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 and water."

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 guests before and after each meeting.

ground), the lower wing catches more
 air while the higher wing allows the
 air to spill off at the tip, thus
 automatically bringing the vulture
 back to the proper flight attitude.

The tail of a soaring Turkey
 Vulture does not tilt from side to
 side or fan out as markedly as that
 of the Red-tailed Hawk and other
 raptors. In this respect the tail of
 the Turkey Vulture seems to be put to
 little use.

Despite its ethereal grace in
 flight, the Turkey Vulture is sluggish
 and can be in trouble when adroit man-
 euvering or rapid climb is called for.
 Occasionally one sees a vulture flying
 low over the city and frantically try-
 ing to outmaneuver a group of Brewer's
 Blackbirds which has perhaps mistaken
 it for a raven. The vulture, desperat-
 ely flapping, diving and turning, careens
 over the treetops, unable to elude the
 blackbirds which flutter after and re-
 peatedly swoop at the vulture. Even-
 tually the blackbirds turn away for
 home, sometimes to be succeeded by
 others over whose territory the vulture
 passes.

One morning in August, as I was
 sitting eating a sandwich among the
 chaparral of a hilltop in the Santa
 Monica Mountains, a dusky-headed im-
 mature vulture began to scrutinize me
 closely. Again and again it circled
 me, coming closer and lower each time
 around. Finally, as it came around,
 it had dropped so low as to be heading
 for the tops of some bushes which rose
 about five feet above my head some 12
 or 15 feet to my left. The bird was
 still watching me so intently that it
 almost failed to notice into what it
 was heading, and at the last possible
 instant it began wildly flapping its
 wings, trying to rise a few inches to
 clear the bushes without "stalling
 out" and crashing. Luckily it lifted
 over rather heavily with little space
 to spare.

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Despite its awkward appearance on the ground or in tight flying situations, few birds can surpass the Turkey Vulture's soaring ability. It is truly a marvelous sight to see one of these birds gliding along among the hills, sometimes dipping into a canyon or skimming over the chaparral on a hillside with hardly a perceptible movement of its immense black wings. It is truly a master soarer.

WHAT THE SOCIETY IS DOING

Thirty-five members and friends of the Los Angeles Audubon Society attended the Thursday Morning Meeting in Long Hall, Plummer Park, October 22. Mrs. Olive Alvey, Chairman, had planned a most interesting program.

Presenting the film, "The Most Wonderful Show in the World," made by

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SATURDAY, NOV. 14, FIELD TRIP TO PLAYA DEL REY by Ernest J. Willoughby

About 18 people attended this productive trip to Playa del Rey. Because most of the area around the mouth of Ballona Creek was fenced off for the construction of the new small boat harbor, our observations were confined primarily to the beach here. Therefore it was decided to include Malibu Lagoon on the itinerary in order to increase the number of species seen.

At Playa del Rey the group was treated to a spectacular display of over 300 Scoters feeding close to the shore near the jetties. Most were Surf Scoters, but a good proportion of White-winged and at least 6 Common (American) Scoters were present. Individuals of all three species were feeding along the northernmost jetty, affording excellent views for comparison. Most were diving for mussels which they tore from the rocks and swallowed whole.

Also found at Playa del Rey were Western, Eared and Horned Grebes; Black-

bellied Plover, Surf-bird, Black Turnstone, Willet, Sanderling, Western Gull, California Gull, Ring-billed Gull (including a partial albino specimen), Bonaparte's Gull, Heermann's Gull, Forster's Tern and others.

At Malibu Lagoon the group added to the list Arctic (Pacific) Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Marsh Hawk, Snowy Plover, Spotted and Least Sandpipers, Marbled Godwit, Glaucous-winged Gull, Common (Short-billed) Gull and others. A Pelagic Cormorant and a single female Goldeneye were fairly unusual finds. Altogether 42 species were recorded.

NOVEMBER 19 FIELD TRIP TO WILLIAM S. HART RANCH PARK

A dreary autumn day lured 25 from pre-holiday preparations to take advantage of the opportunity, arranged by Edna Burt, to travel by bus to the William S. Hart Ranch Park. Mr. Thomas, Park Supt., met and guided the group through the grounds and beautiful hill-top museum, once the home of the famous actor horseman. Graciousness of all park attendants is gratefully acknowledged.

Grassy hills and arroyos with their scattered oaks provide shelter and food for a varied birdlife. Notably numerous were Acorn Woodpeckers, California Quail in flocks and Oregon Juncoes so easy to watch from park lunch tables. Other species observed within the park: Scrub Jay, Red-shafted Flicker, Band-tailed Pigeon, Crow, White-crowned Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Hermit Thrush, Brown Towhee, Spotted Towhee, Mockingbird, Brewer Blackbird, Say Phoebe, Plain Titmouse, Hutton Vireo, Audubon Warbler, Dusky Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Anna Hummingbird.

Dorothy F. Lilly

DECEMBER 8th Shower

In my garden, 125 Cedar Waxwings and 4 robins, on exposed treetops, spread fluttering wings to catch an inexpressibly refreshing bath in the first

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rain of the season. Linnets who frequently dunk in the bird bath looked for cover.

Dorothy F. Lilly

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5th, FIELD TRIP

The field trip of Saturday, December 5 was attended by a rather small group. Only ten persons cared to stand up against the high winds of that day, and three of these, who did not succeed in finding the main group, had a little trip of their own.

The group first explored the road from Maricopa to the top of Mount Abel in the Los Padres National Forest. On the mountain it was quite cold and windy and only a few birds were seen. From the road, however, were seen Marsh, Red-tail, Cooper's and Sparrow Hawks, and Golden Eagle.

The Carrizzo Plain was entered by traversing the Elkhorn Valley. This area was teeming with Horned Larks, Lark Sparrows, and Mountain Bluebirds. A piece of luck was spotting about 30 Mountain Plover in a grassy area. This was a new bird for several of the party. An attempt was made to discover some Longspurs that had been reported on the plain but it was evident that this was nearly hopeless among the thousands of Larks and Sparrows.

Soda Lake was completely dry as was the entire plain. Although the main party waited until dark, no Cranes were seen. Local residents reported that only a few scouts had been in during this season and they had not stayed. The sub-party of three persons that explored separately were more fortunate. After leaving Soda Lake, they saw a small flock of Cranes near the north end of Buena Vista Lake, establishing the presence of some of these birds in the vicinity.

J. W. Huffman

TUESDAY EVENING MEETING, DEC. 8th

There was a record turnout for the Tuesday Evening Meeting December 8. The feature of the program was an illus-

trated talk given jointly by Arnold Small and Herb Clarke on the 4000 mile plus vacation trip taken last summer by Herb and Olga Clarke and Arnold and Mimi Small. Everyone present enjoyed hearing the account of their trip and their birding experiences, but the outstandingly beautiful color slides which Herb and Arnie took on their trip and which they used to illustrate their talk were the highlight of the evening's program.

After the program nearly everyone stayed to enjoy refreshments consisting of coffee, cake and cookies served in honor of the season. Our thanks go to Melba Blackstone for arranging the refreshments, which were very tastefully done.

Bob Blackstone

SATURDAY, DEC. 12th FIELD TRIP

The Wilsons gave us a most enjoyable trip to Hansen Dam. It was well-planned and carried out after some little time and trouble had been expended in advance to have area gates open at 7:00 A. M. The birding between 7:00 A. M. and 9:00 was on both sides of the main pond. Fried eggs, bacon and coffee were delectable at 9:00. Then we journeyed to the east pond.

Marsh areas of a year ago had disappeared due to the dry year. Shore birds were therefore scarce. However, there were a good many ducks plus the one snow goose which we saw last year. Of ducks there were Mallards, Baldpates, Pintails, Shovellers, a Redhead, Canvas Backs, Lesser Scaups, and Ruddies represented. Other interesting birds were Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Marsh Hawk, many Dunlins, a Dowitcher, Black and Say Phoebe, Bewick Wrens, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Water Pipits, Loggerhead Shrikes, a Hutton Vireo, Green-backed Goldfinches, Chipping Sparrows, 43 different species all told to hold the attention of about 15 very content people.

Hugh Weiser

The Friends of the Zoo, were Mr. Dean Torrence, assistant to Mr. Maurice A. Machris, President of the Friends group and Mr. C. V. Duff, who told of the hopes of that group to bring to Los Angeles a zoo which would be the equal of the world-famous ones shown in this fine film.

Mrs. Russell Wilson spoke on "Birding in Arizona," and showed colored slides of the many beautiful areas visited by the Wilsons in that state. She pointed out how the birding varies in the seasons but stressed the fact that at all times the presence of water and vegetation makes the difference between good and poor birding.

Mrs. Wilson also showed skins of unusual birds seen in the Arizona desert areas and told a few of the many interesting experiences finding them and hearing and seeing them alive. Plenty of time to watch for them is one of the important elements in seeing unusual specimens, as well as "being in the right place at the right time," according to Mrs. Wilson.

Gudrun E. Pepke, Historian

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY

A beautiful day! A wonderful party! With many lovely things to see, interesting people to listen to, friendly people to talk with, delicious refreshments, gaily wrapped gifts for the birds, and everyone having the best of good times! Carols were sung.

And where and when was this? The Annual Christmas Party of the Los Angeles Audubon Society held in Great Hall at Plummer Park on December 3.

Sixty members and friends were there. A special guest was Mr. Wm. N. Goodall of Berkeley, Pacific Coast Representative of the National Audubon Society, who gave us a little talk. Mr. Edward Anacker, Recreation Director of the Los Angeles City Department of Recreation and Parks, and a member of the Los Angeles Audubon Society, told of work being done by the Parks Dept. in developing the Bixby Slough area so that it will continue to be a good birding area. He assured us that we have many good friends in the Parks Department who are just as eager to protect the rights of birds as we are.

Walt Disney's delightful "Nature's Half Acre" was shown. Miss Lucy Starling, who served as missionary in Thailand for many years, entertained us in her inimitable fashion with two readings, "Moses and the Bulrushes" and "Jezebel."

Artistic talents galore were displayed in the beautiful and unusual creations of Christmas decorations made with natural materials, such as seed-pods, cones, twigs, grasses, and evergreens, as well as other materials. These included table decorations, wreaths, Christmas trees, corsages, and amusing animals. Olive Alvey, Mary V. Hood, Alice Lewis, and others were the members responsible for these fascinating articles.

Thanks should be given to Marion Wilson, mistress of ceremonies, Olive Alvey, chairman, and her committee, Alice Lewis, Nurtha Dunn, and Elizabeth Fulton, and the other members who helped to make this one of the outstanding events on the Audubon calendar.

GEP

In The Elepaio, Journal of The Hawaii Audubon Society for September, 1959, part of a thought-provoking article by Richard E. Warner, Wildlife Biologist, Dept. of Agriculture & Forestry, for the Island of Kauai, mentioned the plight of the Avifauna of the Hawaiian Islands. Among other things, he wrote that at the very moment his article was being read, the entire Eastern Island was being cleared of all bushes, trees, hills, locks, was being completely flattened and was to have the entire surface paved to insure the proper functioning of an ultra-high-frequency transmitting station to be installed there, which meant that tens of thousands of nesting sea birds were being bulldozed into the surf, by the Navy. He added that there has not been nor is there expected to be an official complaint lodged or question raised by any conservation agency.

Gudrun E. Pepke, Historian

CONSERVATION

As advocates of conservation, we are pleased to note that we have one more ally. Last year two chapters of Nature Conservancy, a relatively new but fast-growing organization, were established here in Southern California.

Their purpose is evident from their name, but one of their techniques, at least here in Southern California, is very effective; they enlist the direct aid - indeed many of the members - of numerous existing organizations interested in conservation. The talent thus harbored plus the resulting coordination of effort provide a truly powerful agency for conservation. The following is a partial list of groups that have given their active support and financial aid to Nature Conservancy:

Zoological Society of Los Angeles,
So. California Botanical Society,
the Los Angeles, Pasadena and San
Fernando Audubon Societies,
Aboretum Foundation, Equestrian
Trails, Inc., Los Angeles Board of
Education, and many others.

Nature Conservancy is interested in all phases of conservation, but the one they seem to emphasize is the establishment of sanctuaries and nature reserves. Frequently, if they cannot convince other governmental agencies to set up a certain reserve, they will purchase the area themselves and create a privately-owned sanctuary. As a matter of fact, their first major project in the West, currently under way, is the direct purchase of 6500 acres in Mendocino County. The \$125,000 necessary for this "Coast Range Preserve" has not been completely raised (if you are interested, contributions can be sent to:

Nature Conservancy,
Western Regional Office,
1711-A Grove Street,
Berkeley 9, California).

The two local chapters, namely: the Southern California Chapter and the Orange-San Diego Chapters, have an amazing record considering that they are less than one year old. They have been active in such projects as: (1) working hard for the Big Tujunga Wash Reserve; (2) helping raise money for the expansion and modernization of the Modjeska Sanctuary (known to some as the Tucker Hummingbird Sanctuary); (3) giving assistance to the Maxton Brown Bird Sanctuary (known as the Buena Vista Lagoon) which is being threatened by development plans; (4) undertaking a study of the Bolsa Chica tidal marsh with the possibility of creating a sanctuary; (5) working with the County of Los Angeles in assuring several wildflower reservations, as well as at least ten other projects not possible to list because of space limitations.

I am sure that we all welcome Nature Conservancy to Southern California. If you would care to join, just send \$5.00 to the above-mentioned address.

FRANK LITTLE

DARLINGTONIA WAYSIDE

For those fortunate enough to have heard Dr. Tilden W. Roberts and seen his colored motion picture "Parallels in Nature" at our Annual Dinner last June 10, this information may be of interest.

Pitcher plants (Darlingtonia) whose relatives are found on the U.S. east coast, in South America, Ceylon and Madagascar can most conveniently be seen at the Darlingtonia Wayside. This is sixteen and one-half acres of boggy land set aside by Oregon State Parks Dept. on Highway U.S. 101, six miles north of Florence, Oregon at the junction of the paved county road to Mercer Lake.



PUBLISHED MONTHLY, SEPTEMBER TO MAY
BY THE LOS ANGELES AUDUBON SOCIETY INC.

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CALENDAR FOR JANUARY, 1960

- January 5 SCREEN TOUR - HIGH HORIZONS - William Ferguson - Tuesday Evening
7:45 - Virgil Junior High School, 152 No. Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles
- January 9 SATURDAY FIELD TRIP to Fern Dell in Griffith Park. Meet at Museum at
8:00 A.M. This is the same day as the Screen Tour but we will adjourn
early.
Leader: Ethel Craig, AX 1-1524
- January 9 SCREEN TOUR - HIGH HORIZONS - William Ferguson - Saturday Afternoon
at 2:00 o'clock. John Burroughs Junior High School, 600 South McCadden
Place, Los Angeles.
- January 12 TUESDAY EVENING MEETING - 8:00 P.M. in Great Hall, Plummer Park,
7377 Santa Monica Blvd. The main part of the program will be devoted
to waterfowl. Two short films will be shown: "Water Birds" (this is
not the Disney Film), and "Wildfowl in Slow Motion." These are inter-
esting and educational; the latter is in color.
- January 14 EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING
- January 21 THIRD THURSDAY FIELD TRIP TO FERN DELL in Griffith Park. Meet at
Parking Lot in Fern Dell, Western Ave. entrance to Griffith Park at
9:00 A. M. Take Western Ave. bus to Russell St., 2 blocks north of
Hollywood Blvd. Those wanting a ride from here to Fern Dell watch for
cars of our members. Mrs. Ruth McCune will identify birds for us.
We will eat our lunch at the Scroptomist Site. At 1:00 o'clock we go
to Fern Dell Museum where Mr. John Peebles, one of our members, will
show various slides of birds. Many birds, wild flowers, wild shrubs
here to enjoy. Birds will appreciate food. No reservations, no charge.
Leader: Edna Burt - PL 5-1044
- January 24 SUNDAY FIELD TRIP to Chatsworth Reservoir in the San Fernando Valley
to see wintering ducks and geese. Group will meet at the corner of
Reseda and Roscoe Blvd. in Northridge at 8:00 A. M.
Leader: Reg Julian - PO 1-8517
- January 28 THURSDAY MORNING MEETING - Plummer Park, Long Hall, 10 to 12 o'clock.
Miss Lucy Starling will compare our birds with "Our Bird Cousins in
Thailand" and Mr. George Hastings will conduct the study of "The Egg
and Development of the Bird." This will be an outstanding program.