

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Turkey vultures are one of the largest soaring birds in the Central Valley. They are between 26-32 inches tall with a 72 inch wing span. Their basic coloration is iridescent black with black wings. The undersides of the wings are a silvery gray. The neck and head are naked--red in adults and gray in adolescents. Turkey vultures serve as clean-up detail, eating carrion often on the roadsides. They are one of few birds with an acute sense of smell making it possible for them to detect which direction the scent is coming from. They have a remarkable digestive system which allows them to eat meat diseased with anthrax without being affected themselves. Turkey vultures are community based—living and working together in cooperation. They are easy to spot in the early morning with wings outstretched in an effort to catch the first warming, drying rays of the dawn sun.

Vern

Since Turkey Vultures feed on road kill. It is not uncommon for them to get hit by a car. Vern's wing wds injured so badly, a portion of it was amputated. These are soaring bird, so Vern will have to remain at Critter Creek. When turkey vultures get upset, they cough up all the food in their crop in order to lighten their load so they can take flight. Keeping one in captivity, if it is stressed, can be a challenge. Vern was fortunately able to relax in his new home. He lives in our 100-foot flight cage working a lot like a catfish does in a large aquarium. The food our

hawks and eagles don't eat, he is ready to clean up for us. His beak, bald head, and heron-like talons provide valuable lessons in adaptation to students when he comes along on our bird of prey programs. His stinky breath and "harbinger of death" reputation always elicit "yucks" from the young students. However, once they learn of his "vacuum cleaner" function in nature's scheme of things, they come away with a better appreciation of just what a valuable asset he is to have around. As we say whenever someone is near him "You better look alive!"

