

WING-TAGGING TURKEY VULTURES

C. STUART HOUSTON, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0J8, and BRENT TERRY, 64 MacLean Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7J 2R7



Figure 1. Turkey Vulture adult over Borden site

Turkey Vulture nests typically are in a smelly cave littered with decomposing food items. The “nestling-hiss” of the fledgling, a roar like a fire hose, can be loud and frightening on first encounter. The fledgling’s habit of vomiting when excited by a human visit is even less appealing, as is its propensity to “urohidrosis,” excreting down its legs. The latter habit sometimes results in the liquid excreta hardening like cement around a leg band, then eroding the tarsus. For this reason, about 1976, the banding office ceased issuing leg bands for vultures.

Because of open windows, odor is less of a deterrent to banders when Turkey Vultures nest in abandoned houses. In 2002, there were three pairs of Turkey

Vultures nesting in deserted houses near Saskatoon.¹ In 2003, at least 15 Turkey Vulture pairs were located in abandoned buildings across the width of southern and central Saskatchewan. With the new nest locations and young available, we embarked on a program of marking nestling Turkey Vultures using a patagial tag on the right wing, similar to those used on both wings of every released California Condor.

Since banders are ONLY allowed to apply these tags after they have received hands-on instruction from an expert, one of us (BT) flew to Orange County, California in late June, where Peter H. Bloom of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology generously provided

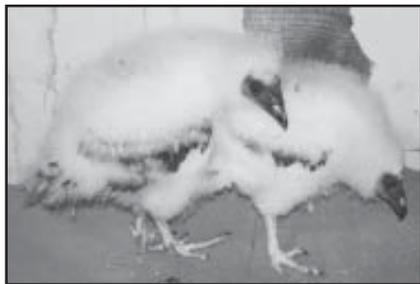


Figure 2. Nestling Turkey Vultures at Borden, 23 and 25 days old, weighing 550 and 675 g.

instruction and hospitality. BT observed Pete applying a patagial tag to a Turkey Vulture, and then did another under Pete's supervision. The tags, one portion on the dorsal side of the wing and the other on the ventral side, are made of herculite fabric with large white letters that can easily be read by telescope or binoculars. They are very similar to ear tags attached to cattle.

Figures 5-12 show the new nest sites where young were tagged in 2003. The

nest near Smuts was in the building occupied last year and illustrated in a previous article.¹ The name of the person who found each nest is given in parentheses in the photo captions. All photographs in this article, with the exception of Figure 3, were taken by Brent Terry.

We learned of three nest failures in 2003. One in a brush pile near Leoville appeared to have been predated by raccoons. Racoons also took over the attic of a house where another pair of vultures had been seen. The third, a nest found by Art Pask in a granary south of Esterhazy, had a single egg hatch on June 9 but the nestling was in a small unventilated space near the roof and died in the heat wave in late August.

Fourteen young were tagged at the nine successful sites we visited. Young were tagged when they had a wingspan of five feet or more. Three nests (at Smuts, St. Louis, and Rabbit Lake) had one young



Figure 3. Brent Terry and Michael Blom with a young Turkey Vulture tagged near Sturgis on 15 August 2003. Shirley Johnston

each while the other six nests had two young each; the nest at Nora was visited so late that one of the two nestlings climbed onto the roof and flew away without a tag.

Before and after they learn to fly, the young often sit on the roof of these nest-site houses or on adjacent sheds. They stay near the nest for up to five weeks, flying low at first, but eventually rising to 300 m above ground. By 31 August, the two young near Ranger were flying 8 km from the house in which they had been raised. At eight of nine nests, neighbouring farmers provided reports of sightings (Table 1). We are encouraged by success to date, with no evident morbidity or mortality from the tags.

In the past two summers, we have learned a number of things about the habits of Turkey Vultures that nest in abandoned buildings. When people visit a nest site,

the absence of adult vultures does not mean that the site has been deserted; adults appeared overhead during about half of our visits but may appear with a full crop of food for the young only once every day or two. Nestlings hide in the darkest corner or crevice of the attic, sometimes in a former clothes closet or a recess under the eaves, and a cursory look may not be sufficient to find them. Young do not always give the loud “nestling hiss” but when they do, that is the best way to locate them. All visits to nest site should be short; adults may desert the nest and leave the young to starve if a visitor stays more than one hour or if a visitor tries to prolong their stay by hiding behind a blind.

Next year, we hope even more people will report active vulture nest locations, anywhere in Saskatchewan, to the first author at 306-244-0742 (between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m.).

Table 1 - Sightings after young vultures left nest

Locality	Date of Tagging	Last Date Number Read
Bapaume	Aug 5	Sep 13
Ranger	Aug 5	Sep 12
Mont Nebo	Aug 5	Sep 13
Smuts	Aug 6	Aug 26
St. Louis	Aug 6	Sep 11
Sturgis	Aug 8	Sep 1
Nora	Aug 8	not checked
Wishart	Aug 16	Oct 4
Rabbit Lake	Aug 17	Sep 16

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the instruction from Peter Bloom and the people who located the nests. Michael Blom and Marten Stoffel were of great assistance during the tagging process.