

TURKEY VULTURES: A WELCOME SIGN OF SPRING!

By Tom Ryzewski

While generally not welcomed by the public in the same way as crocuses, robins and the roar of the crowd at Fenway Park, the sight of the first turkey vulture, *Cathartes aura*, is a wonderfully pleasant late February event to us naturalists. It is one of the many signposts pointing to the coming of springtime. These huge aerial carnivores have spent the winter months in the south and have now migrated back to our New England area. I saw my first one on Wednesday, February 23, 2006. It was soaring silently and gracefully several hundred feet high, a black silhouette against a deep blue sky. I was thrilled!

While turkey vultures may resemble hawks to some extent, recent DNA studies have shown new world vultures more closely related to storks than to hawks or even old world vultures. Our vultures have evolved bodies and behaviors to efficiently locate and consume carrion. Their brains have large olfactory bulbs, which process information from a good sized nasal cavity. This means a great sense of smell, something not all that common in many birds. Using rising warm air currents they soar to great heights to locate dead animals, using keen eyesight but especially that nose that is sensitive to ethyl mercaptan, a chemical given off by rotting flesh. It is mainly smell that allows them to locate food on the ground as they soar over dense forests.

I have often seen turkey vultures sitting in trees along rivers, their wings spread to dry and realign their feathers. Dead fish, other aquatic carrion and even live baby turtles make gourmet shoreline dinners for these wondrous beasts as they live out their vital roles in the vast web of life.