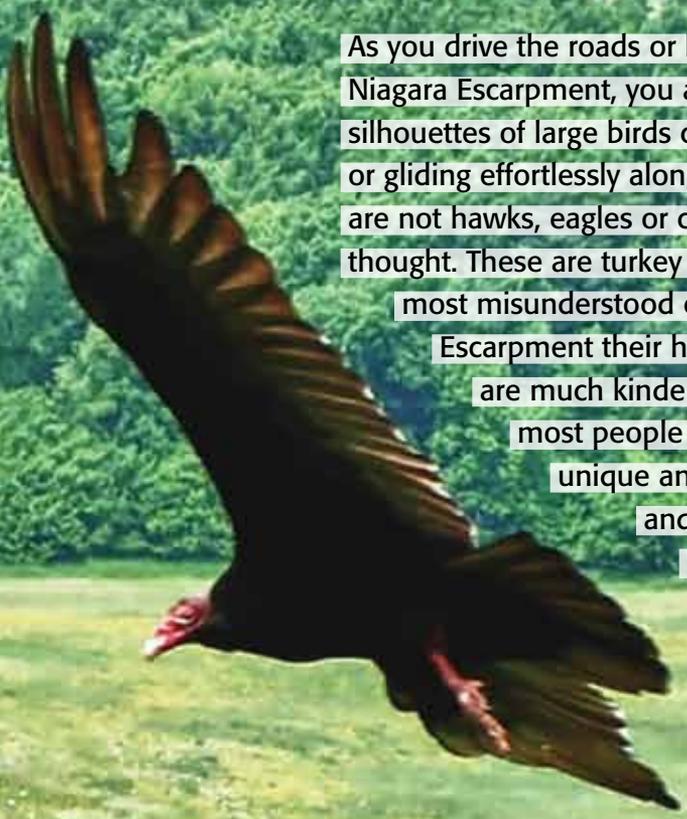




# Miraculous, Timid Turkey Vultures

Words & photos by Chris Hamilton

A large turkey vulture is captured in mid-flight, its dark wings spread wide against a backdrop of a lush green landscape. The bird's head is turned to the left, showing its characteristic red, featherless skin. The background consists of rolling green hills and fields, with a dense line of trees in the distance. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

As you drive the roads or hike the trails along the Niagara Escarpment, you are likely to see the dark silhouettes of large birds circling in the distance or gliding effortlessly along the cliff face. These are not hawks, eagles or crows as commonly thought. These are turkey vultures, one of the most misunderstood creatures to make the Escarpment their home. Turkey vultures are much kinder, gentler creatures than most people realize. They have many unique and interesting qualities, and are classified as the most graceful bird in flight. Spend just a little time watching them from a quiet Escarpment vantage point, and you'll see that for yourself.

The Niagara Escarpment provides perfect habitat for the majestic, useful turkey vulture.

## Miraculous, Timid Turkey Vultures



Vultures in a social group will roost in trees and spread their wings in a horaltic pose to let the sun dry off bacteria they picked up from eating carrion.



While searching for vulture nests at the base of the Escarpment, Chris Hamilton was hissed at from a small cave at his feet. The arrow shows the location of the baby vulture nest he discovered.



Turkey vultures soar in aerial ballets, singly or in social groups that circle high in the sky in a "kettle."



This juvenile vulture in the cave nest is nine weeks old. Photographing babies is very difficult, sometimes impossible.



From early March to early November turkey vultures live throughout southern Ontario as far north as the Sudbury/Manitoulin area. You can see them almost anywhere, since they stay close to major roads and highways. Those areas provide their major source of food: road kill. That's right, the vulture's main diet is carrion, which is dead animals! Turkey vultures aren't picky about much of anything, so they will also find food in landfills; they will roost on fence posts and roofs, and will nest in barn lofts or even hollow logs.

You haven't seen the true nature, beauty or character of the turkey vulture, though, until you've seen them living along the Niagara Escarpment. The Escarpment provides the perfect habitat for these creatures and, in turn, they play a valuable role in the Escarpment ecosystem. As carrion feeders, vultures not only help keep clean the local ecosystem, they also help prevent the spread of disease. They are equipped with a miraculous digestive system that will purify

anything they eat even if it is infected with disease or deadly virus. After feeding, and several times through the day, they will roost in trees and assume the "horaltic pose" by spreading their wings fully with their back to the sun. This dries out the wings and bakes off any bacteria from their bald heads and chicken-like feet. Vultures can clean a carcass in no time. If it is large, a deer for example, they will even travel to other "roosts" to enlist the aid of more vultures.

### Social Birds

Vultures are surprisingly social. They are also very timid. They do not kill or attack anything or anyone. If no other food is available, they will eat leaves, nuts and berries. When approached, a turkey vulture will try to fly away, play dead, hiss at you or, as a last resort, vomit on you! And that's more foul smelling than getting sprayed by a skunk!

Turkey vultures are actually members of the stork family. Their scientific name, *Cathartes aura*, translates roughly to "cleansing

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The juvenile vulture has a black head until its second year, when the head turns red.

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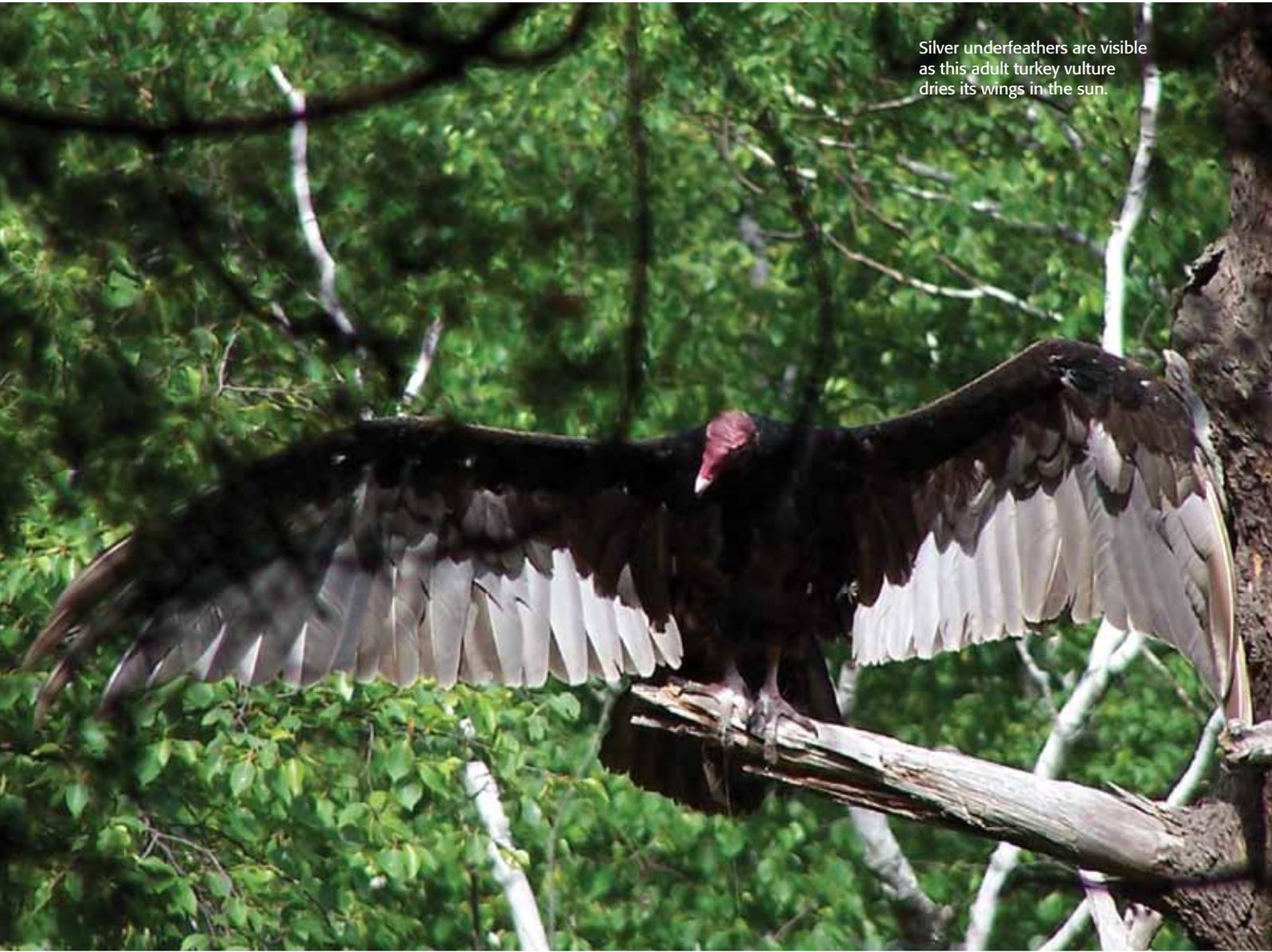
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“breeze” which refers to both the “cleaning” of carrion they provide and to their superior ability in

flight. On the ground or in trees, these birds are clumsy and awkward. Yet with a few large hops and a few beats of their six-foot or one-metre wingspan, they glide

like a “breeze.” Watching them in flight is like watching an aerial ballet. In Ontario, it is along the Escarpment that the most fantastic sights can be seen.

The Escarpment provides turkey vultures with perfect places to nest, roost and, most importantly to the vultures, play. The sun heats the cool damp air below the Escarpment cre-



Silver underfeathers are visible as this adult turkey vulture dries its wings in the sun.



By eating carrion, vultures clean the ecosystem and prevent disease. Although large, with six-foot wingspans, they are timid and will eat nuts, berries or leaves rather than kill anything.

ating thermal updrafts. These thermals and other air currents provide the vultures with perfect conditions for flight. With their wings spread out in a dihedral “v” shape, they can ride a thermal up to a height of 20,000 feet, travel up to 200 miles or 330 km per day and glide as long

as six hours without flapping a wing. They will catch a tail wind and skim the edge of the Escarpment at high speeds, then turn around against the wind so slowly it looks as if they are almost floating mid-air.

Most people think that when they see a group of vultures, called a

“venue,” circling high in the air that they are hunting or circling food like in a western movie. This high altitude tornado-shaped circling activity is called a “kettle” and is an opportunity for the vultures to simply get together and play. They will then break off into smaller pairs or groups

and begin a pattern of flight to hunt for food. They use their keen sense of smell to locate food up to two miles away. The birds repeat this pattern often through the day taking time out to return to their roosting area to sun and preen. Then they begin the whole process again.

## Vulture Nests

The Escarpment also provides good nesting and roosting habitat. At the Escarpment's base bare trees provide excellent places for the birds to roost and sun themselves. The cliff face also provides cool ledges to rest on during the hottest days of summer. The ledges provide excellent places for the vultures to lay eggs, away from predators. Vultures do not build nests, but rather use ledges, hollow logs or small caves to lay their eggs. After mating in early spring the female vulture will lay one to three large brown-spotted eggs. Both parents take turns tending the young until it fledges in late August. The juvenile is born as a little white furball with a black leathery head which will turn red in its second year.

In 2006 I witnessed vulture activity at the base of the escarpment at Mount Nemo, and started looking for a nest there.

While searching for evidence on a chest-high ledge at the base of the cliff, I was hissed at from a small cave at my feet! I had found a nest with vultures in it. That year I found another nest high on a ledge, completely inaccessible. Two young were born from that nest, one from the small cave nest. I managed to snap a few weak photos of this nest from a distance.

There is much more to be said about these amazing creatures, their attributes and their shy and playful character, but the best way to learn is to see them for yourself. The next time you are out along the Escarpment, watch for vultures and enjoy the show! ■

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