CUYAHOGA VALLEY TOWPATH TRAIL CENSUS MONTHLY NEWSLETTER - OCTOBER 2023
(CVTTC)

HISTORY & FACTS *of the* OCTOBER CENSUS

OCTOBER	13-YEAR TOTALS of SPECIES / INDIVIDUALS								
2010	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
67 / 5,796	63 / 1,324	53 / 1,250	54 / 1,886	59 / 1,857	65 / 1,203	71 / 1,913	52 / 1,536	48 / 8,838
	2020	**2021**	**2022**					
59 / 1,333	67 / 915	55 / 2,736	59 / 912					

Most Species seen in October : 71 Species on 10/01/2016.
Most Individual Birds seen in October : 8,838 Total Birds on 10/06/2018.
Fewest Species seen in October : 48 Species on 10/06/2018.
Fewest Individual Birds seen in October : 912 Total Birds on 10/01/2022.
Species Average in October : 59.4 Total Species.
Total Individuals Average in October : 2,423.0 Total Birds.
Lowest Temperature on October Census : 41-degrees F on 10/03/15 & 10/05/19.
Highest Temperature on October Census : 84-degrees F on 10/06/2018.
Longest Time Afield on October Census : 10 hours & 20 minutes on 10/01/10 & 10/06/18.
Shortest Time Afield on October Census : 8 hours & 10 minutes on 10/05/2012.

LAST OCTOBER'S FIELD REPORT

10/01/22	**TOTAL SPECIES:**	*59*	**TOTAL BIRDS:**	*912*	
START / END TIME:	*7:25am - 5:30pm*		**TIME AFIELD:**	*10:05*	**FT. MI.:** *13.85*
ROUTE:	*Red Lock Trailhead south to Merriman Valley with a stop at Trail Mix in Peninsula. We stopped at Szalay's Sweet Corn Farm & Market for lunch but it was too crowded, so we moved on.*				
TEMP.:	*50F ~ 63F ~ 61F*	**CONDITIONS:**	*Cloudy all day, turning breezy after 10:10am from wrap-around storm remnants of Hurricane Ian.*		
OBSERVERS:	*John Henry and Douglas W. Vogus.*				
TRAIL CONDITIONS:	*Great.*	**RIVER CONDITIONS:**	*Normal and clear.*		

FIVE YEARS AGO on the TOWPATH TRAIL

On 10/06/2018 we set a census high count for the original "treetop flyer," the Turkey Vulture. A difficult species to accurately count due to the fact that they cover so much territory, we tallied 59 for that day, with 56 of those seen at one time "kettling" over Merriman Valley at the end of the census route.

Those of us living or commuting around Merriman Valley are used to large numbers of vultures in this area, as many roost along the southwest hillside at Timber Top apartments or the cell towers nearby when the roost is full. These perches make for an excellent launchpad to catch the Cuyahoga Valley's rising thermals as the morning air warms up.

OCTOBER 2023's BIRD SPECIES PROFILE

TURKEY VULTURE *(Cathartes aura)*

DESCRIPTION: *Large, black or blackish-brown; sexes similar in size, outwardly alike.* ***ADULTS:*** *Bare skin of head and neck dull red to purple-brown with some sparse bristles; eyes gray-brown; legs pale, fleshy white; in flight overhead, pale silvery lining of rear part of wings contrasts with dark coverts of forepart of wings; small red naked head (black in immature bird) and long slim tail while gliding or soaring, with long upswept wings held in flattened 'V' as it sways and tilts in flight, are characteristic.*

LENGTH: *26" - 32"* **WINGSPAN:** *68" - 72"* **WEIGHT:** *4.5 lbs. to 5.4 lbs.*

VOICE: *Usually silent, but over coveted animal carcass group may push, flop, hiss, and fight in bloodless way, occasionally grunt or utter raucous growl suggesting a note similar to larger herons.*

HABITS: *Usual hunting flights are about 200 feet above ground or just above tops of woods and over fields as it searches for prey by sight and smell; also soars to tremendous height; in migration to 4,000 to 5,000 feet as it moves northward. Pairings are often preceded by a group "dance" in which numbers gather on ground in open area, where each hops (with wings trailing) toward its neighbor, which in turn hops toward a third vulture. On ground is awkward, hops clumsily with sideways hitch, has ungainly walk; to get airborne from ground, will lean forward, stumble a few steps, hop, and with quick push from legs, and visibly straining, flaps wings, and eventually gets under way. At night groups of a few to up to 70 or more may roost in trees, from which they leave, often in late morning, to soar over the countryside.*

Eats almost entirely carrion, fresh to putrid; from single vulture to many gather quickly after death of animals, from alligators and deer to road-killed raccoons, opossums, skunks, woodchucks, squirrels, rabbits, snakes, turtles, small birds, etc. and groups gather after farmers mowing or baling hay to scavenge any casualties - nothing goes to waste. Very beneficial.

HABITAT: *Lives over open plains, desert, forest, or jungle - usually seen in flight or roadsides.*

NESTING: ***NEST:*** *No materials.* ***EGGS:*** *Laid on bare floor of caves, rocks, cliffs, on rotted wood inside hollow logs, hollow trees, or in hollow stumps, on ground in dense shrubbery, often in swamp, sometimes under floor or on bare floors of abandoned buildings, collapsed sheds, or old barns in woods. Both parents may roost inside dark nest cavity after eggs are laid; adult may feign death if caught in hands at nest or regurgitate foul-smelling food. Eggs are March to June, as early as February in southern U.S., 1 to 3 eggs, usually 2, dull white to cream-white, spotted, blotched, splashed with brown; some unmarked.* ***INCUBATION:*** *By both sexes, 38 to 41 days; adults feed young by regurgitation; fly when 70 to 80 days old.*

RANGE: *The most widespread vulture in North America. Resident, except in northern parts of range, from which migrates in fall, from southern Canada to South America, also in Bahamas and West Indies. Vagrant to Alaska, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Newfoundland.*

STATUS: *Stable. Population is increasing in numbers in northern, snowbound states.*

Abundance Codes on the graphs below indicate best time of year to find the Turkey Vulture in Northeast Ohio.

Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.
oooooooo	ooorrruuu	CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC
Jul.	**Aug.**	**Sep.**	**Oct.**	**Nov.**	**Dec.**
CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC	CCCCCCC	uuurrrrrrr	rrrrooooo

CCCCCCC	= *Common to Abundant. Frequently encountered in this region during this time of year.*
uuuuuuu	= *Uncommon. Occurs regularly during this time of year but not frequently detected.*
rrrrrrrrrrr	= *Rare. These birds can occur more or less annually but are easily missed in their scant presence in the region.*
oooooooo	= *Occasional. Limited history in this region and are not to be expected.*
********	= *Accidental. Few records in the past 60 years. Not expected in this region during this time of year.*
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	= *Fluctuating Abundance. May occur some years yet absent other years. Irruptive or overwintering birds.*

History of the Turkey Vulture on the Cuyahoga Valley Towpath Trail Census 2010 ~ present.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
JAN.								
FEB.								
MAR.					2		2	
APR.	6	**29**	9	10	14	17	11	17
MAY	**12**	12	**12**	9	8	12	18	10
JUN.	10	28	**12**	8	12	7	14	13
JUL.	1	6	8	2	9	5	11	17
AUG.	3		4	7	5	**18**	12	4
SEP.	6	5	6	7	**15**	11	16	10
OCT.	9	3	7	**18**	1	2	**19**	**19**
NOV.		2			1	1		6
DEC.								

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
JAN.						
FEB.						
MAR.	2	6		1	1	1
APR.	11	13	17	16	16	21
MAY	13	**26**	14	15	15	**22**
JUN.	11	20	**29**	11	8	11
JUL.	8	4	4	10	12	4
AUG.	5	4	4	20	14	7
SEP.	7	7	7	17	**22**	15
OCT.	***59****	12	13	**23**	5	
NOV.	1			1		
DEC.						

*	= *HIGHEST COUNT TOTAL ON CENSUS.*
BOLD #	= *HIGHEST COUNT FOR THAT YEAR.*

DID YOU KNOW?:

Due to their need of rising thermals to take flight, Turkey Vultures are susceptible to being grounded during early spring snowstorms? Freezing rain is one of the worst hazards, dropping the birds from exposed roosts and grounding them due to their wings and feathers being covered in ice. Their wings are truly their greatest asset for their daily survival.

DID YOU KNOW?: *Although the New World vultures resemble the Old World vultures and other members of the family Accipitridae, they are more closely related to the storks? In recognition of this relationship, the American Ornithologists Union now places the Cathartidae in the order Ciconiiformes. The close affinities of the Cathartidae and the storks is supported by recent studies using DNA-DNA hybrydization and mitochondrial DNA and by older descriptions of anatomical and behaviorial similarities. As one example, both groups practice urohydrosis, in which they squirt liquid excrement onto their legs; the evaporation has a cooling effect. (I feel the obligatory, "Don't try this at home" will suffice here. - your Editor).*

In contrast, many behavioral differences separate the Old World and New World vultures. There is no current or fossil anatomical evidence to suggest a close common ancestor. American vultures do not build stick nests, do not have true vocalizations, and do not nest colonially, as do many Old World vultures. Both Old World and New World vultures have naked heads and necks, which prevents the fouling of the feathers while the birds feed on decaying carcasses. Bald heads may also be an adaptation that helps the birds regulate body temperature. Both groups have meat-tearing beaks and feet adapted to walking on the ground. Both feed their young by regurgiatation. But these similarities are now attributed to convergent evolution. The two groups have similar lifestyles, and their adaptations for a diet of carrion evolved independently.

DID YOU KNOW?: *Because vultures and condors eat carrion, how much and how often they eat can be highly unpredictable, and this unpredictability of diet shapes many aspects of their lives. If necessary, cathartids can rapidly ingest large quantities of food and then go for many days without feeding. Generally cathartids prefer the meat of freshly dead animals, but they will eat meat in various stages of putrefaction and appear to have excellent resistance to the microbes and toxins found in decaying flesh. On occasion, the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture will also take live prey, such as nestling herons, and there are records of Black Vultures feeding on living newborn calves and baby turtles. The Black Vulture and the California Condor feed on larger carcasses than does the Turkey Vulture. Both Black and Turkey Vultures feed on on roadkills, and they visit farms, ranches, landfills, shorelines, hunting grounds, and other areas where carrion can be found. Black Vultures sometimes become campground pests, quickly descending on unguarded picnic coolers and gobbling raw eggs and meat. In winter, Turkey Vultures glean small dead mammals from burned-over cane fields in the South. In recent decades, California Condors have foraged in rural farms and ranchlands in southern California.*

DID YOU KNOW?: *All the New World vultures search for food in flight, making use of good wind conditions to travel. The California Condor can travel up to 140 miles a day when searching for food. In general, New World vultures search for food visually; however, the Turkey Vulture can also quickly locate carcasses by smell, a trait that is unusual among birds. Turkey Vultures can reliably locate dead chickens hidden by researchers on the forest floor. With their light wing-loading, they are superb soarers, and with their keen sense of smell they are well adapted to foraging over forests. In contrast, species with heavier wing-loading, such as the California Condor and the Black Vulture, are more likely to feed on large corpses in open habitats. Cathartids follow birds of their own species as well as other avian scavengers to food, quickly forming large feeding aggregations and fighting for dominance with conspecifics as well as with different species. Subordinate only to the Golden Eagle, California Condors easily supplant Turkey Vultures at a carcass. In the eastern United States, Black Vultures easily dominate Turkey Vultures at carcasses, while Crested Caracaras of the falcon family dominate Black Vultures.*

CONSERVATION: *The California Condor has been the target of an intensive conservation program since the early 1980s, when fewer than twenty individuals remained in the wild. Lead poisoning from the ingestion of bullet fragments in carcasses was a major cause of the condor's decline. By 1987 all the wild birds had been captured; thanks to the subsequent captive-breeding program, their numbers have steadily increased. By 2000, there were more than 165 birds, and between 1992 and 1998, 66 condors were released into the wild at sites in California and Arizona.*

Reintroduced birds have continued to die from lead poisoning, and it may not be possible to reestablish the species until lead bullets are replaced with nontoxic alternatives now available. In addition, some birds have been lost to collisions with overhead wires. Young condors reared by their parents have done much better at avoiding human environments than young raised by humans. By 2000, none of the released birds had bred in the wild.

Large, walk-in vulture traps put up by ranchers in Florida and Texas formerly caused the deaths of many thousands of Black and Turkey Vultures, which were trapped to reduce the threat they posed to newborn calves. Subsequently, both species have shown continent-wide population increases, although threats do remain. In the Southeast, modern forestry practices have severely reduced the number of hollow-log nest sites available for Black Vultures. Better sanitation on farms and ranches has reduced the availability of carcasses, but both species have expanded their ranges in the Northeast, apparently to exploit roadkills.

DID YOU KNOW?: *For hundreds of years, lead was used as an additive in paint, gasoline, pipes, and other materials? Citing lead's extreme health risks to humans, especially children, in 1977, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission banned lead paint in residential and public buildings as well as toys and furniture. In 1996, it was banned from the use in gasoline. Unfortunately, the use of lead in bullets and shotgun pellets continues to provide a pathway for lead poisoning in humans and wildlife, including Golden Eagles, hawks, and condors. An estimated 16 million birds are poisoned by lead every year. Some birds, like Bald Eagles, accidentally ingest lead shotgun pellets and ammunition fragments when scavenging on carcasses or remains left by hunters. Other birds such as Mourning Doves mistake spent shot for seed in fields and forests, while diving birds like Common Loons swallow lead fishing tackle while foraging on lake bottoms. Lead bullet fragments or residues in game meat also pose a significant risk to hunters and their families.*

DID YOU KNOW?: *Perhaps the most iconic example of the impact lead toxicity can have on a species' population is that of the California Condor? As of 2019, 500 California Condors remain after numbers had dipped as low as 22 in 1987 due in part to lead poisoning caused by eating animal carcasses containing lead shot. A 2012 study found that two-thirds of California Condor deaths were caused by lead poisoning. To this day, between 45 and 95 percent of the condor population tests positive for lead exposure. In response, California passed a law that will phase out the use of lead ammunition for any hunting purpose by July 1, 2019.*

California's phase out has been successful, and a number of states such as Missouri have taken action to protect wildlife management areas from toxic ammunition. The United States military has been converting to non-lead versions of some bullets, removing thousands of tons of lead from the environment. Non-lead options, such as copper, tin, and tungsten, are readily available; the more these products are used, the more affordable and widely accepted they will become.

American Bird Conservancy website < abcbirds.org >

DID YOU KNOW?: *Lead, a naturally occurring element with no functional role in a plant or animal's system, is extremely toxic to birds? The Raptor Center's medical clinic admits over 150 injured and ill Bald Eagles each year with 85-90% showing some level of lead in their blood. On average, 25-30% of these eagles are documented to have lead toxicity. Most of these majestic birds die or are humanely euthanized to alleviate their extreme suffering. Research has shown that lead toxicity in eagles and other avian scavengers is strongly correlated with deer hunting season. Eagles and other raptors are exposed to lead through ingestion of gut piles or unrecovered deer contaminated with spent ammunition. Each year in the upper Midwest alone, over half a million deer are harvested, with lead-based products being the most commonly used ammunition. Lead core rifle bullets fragment into hundreds of pieces upon impact, and have been found up to 18 inches from the site of the wound. When eagles and other avian scavengers consume gut piles left on the landscape, they ingest a potentially deadly meal. Even at very low levels of exposure, birds show signs of toxicity, including gastrointestinal dysfunction, neurological impairment, depression, seizures, weakness and death.*

WHAT T.R.C. IS DOING: *For decades, every eagle admitted to The Raptor Center has been tested for lead levels. In addition to guiding treatment decisions, this has resulted in a long-term dataset on lead poisoning in Bald Eagles. These data have been used in multiple research studies and as a resource for decision-makers. The Raptor Center has worked with other researchers to demonstrate the connection between lead toxicity in eagles and deer hunting, as well as studied the impacts of lead toxicity and improve treatment protocols, a key component of T.R.C.'s work is public education and outreach. Working with partners throughout the outdoor recreation community, we focus on educating hunters on how their decisions impact wildlife.*

WHAT YOU CAN DO: *Fortunately, there is an easy solution to this problem. There are many effective, non-lead alternatives to lead-based ammunition, with more coming on the market every year. Replacing lead ammunition with a non-lead option is a responsible choice that eliminates exposure of eagle and other wildlife to a potent toxin. It also results in a safer food source for humans as hunting with lead ammunition has been shown to result in venison for consumption being contaminated with lead.*

University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine - The Raptor Center website < raptor.umn.edu >

VULTURES 101: *The Turkey Vulture is a large raptor nearly as big as an eagle. The sexes are similar. From a distance, the bird appears uniformly dark and nearly black except for the flight feathers. Seen from below, the entire outer and trailing edge of the wing shines silver, contrasting starkly with the all-black underparts and a gray tail. Adults and immatures differ only in head color. Adults have naked red heads and bright yellow bills; immatures have dull, unfeathered gray heads and gray bills (as do Black Vultures). In other words, a bird that doesn't have a red head may still be a Turkey Vulture. Subadult birds have red heads but lack the bright yellow bill of adults.*

The wings are long, broad, and planklike. The feathers at the wing tips are deeply slotted, so that they resemble fingers. The tail is broad and is commonly not fanned as are those of most soaring raptors. The head is diminutive - ridiculously small - and its size is accentuated by the full, broad, heavily feathered neck. Turkey Vultures give the impression, in flight, of having a long tail and no head.

DID YOU KNOW?: *The wings are characteristically held sharply uplifted in a bold dihedral that gives them a V-shape. Several other species of raptors hold their wings this way, including the Golden Eagle, the Northern Harrier, the Rough-legged Hawk, the Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, the Ferruginous Hawk, and the Zone-tailed Hawk. Most of these species do not hold their wings as sharply upturned as the Turkey Vulture. Only the Golden Eagle, the dark phases of the several buteos mentioned, and the Zone-tailed Hawk (in the Southwest) resemble a Turkey Vulture enough to cause confusion. With the exception of the Zone-tailed Hawk, only the Turkey Vulture habitually rocks in flight, unsteadily, like a tightrope walker, arms extended to maintain balance. The airborne balancing act is apparent even in a light to moderate breeze. Harriers often rock in flight, but the motion is more suggestive of a ship riding a swell (in light winds), and Harriers are much smaller, slimmer-winged birds and never look black. The rocking motion alternately exposes and hides the silvery underwings, making them seem at a distance to flash, like a mirror catching the sun, as the bird rocks in flight or wheels in a thermal.*

DID YOU KNOW?: *Once airborne, Turkey Vultures rarely need to flap. When they do, the wing beat is heavy and deep - quite eaglelike. Turkey Vultures do have the curious habit of drooping their wing tips and quickly straightening them in a sort of mock-flap. The arm remains rigid; the hands simply wilt and then snap back. No other species of raptor manifests this behavior, and Turkey Vultures do habitually. The Golden Eagle is probably the bird most likely to be confused with a Turkey Vulture. Golden Eagles are large, dark, long-tailed, and proportionately short-headed. Golden Eagles also fly with their wings in a dihedral. But, Golden Eagles do not rock in flight. The flight of an eagle is steady.*

Nature's hang-glider - the large wings of the Turkey Vulture make it a master of the wind and can soar for hours.

(photo by: Charles J. Sharp)

DID YOU KNOW?: *Vultures are not "buzzards"? Early British settlers in America called the Turkey Vulture a buzzard because of its fancied resemblance in flight to the buteonine hawks of Europe, where buteos in that country are called buzzards.*

When vultures, birds of prey, and other large soaring birds ride air thermals in large groups it is called a "kettle."

(photo by: Glenn Bartley)

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