

turkey vulture *Cathartes aura*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Carthartiformes

Family: Cathartidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

An adult turkey vulture is 26 to 32 inches long. This bird has a bare, red head and red feet. The underside of the wing feathers is black near the body and gray at the outer edge. The body feathers are black. This bird has a very small head for its body size. The wingspan of a turkey vulture is nearly six feet.

BEHAVIORS

The turkey vulture is a common migrant through Illinois, a summer resident and an occasional winter resident in the southern two-thirds of the state. It may be seen perching on dead trees or feeding on the ground. It is associated with woods but needs open areas to search for food. It is commonly seen in hilly areas with bluffs. It spends most of its time soaring in the sky. The turkey vulture feeds mostly on dead organisms. Its wings form a shallow "V" during flight. This bird soars high in the sky in a wide circle pattern as it searches for food. When the turkey vulture is on the ground, it wobbles when it walks. A defensive measure used by this bird is vomiting. Migrating turkey vultures begin arriving in Illinois in February. This bird nests in hollow sycamores and other trees, old barns, hollow stumps and rock crevices. Two eggs, white with brown spots, are laid in the nest in late spring. Fall migration peaks in October.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie and Edge Habitats

edge; hill prairie

© Illinois Department of Natural Resources. 2019. Biodiversity of Illinois.