



January-February 2010

## THE TURKEY VULTURE

by Lanny and Marilyn Johnson

The Jones family was in the bird house of a zoo when they came upon a large enclosure with a turkey vulture perched on a dead tree.

"Wow," Billy squealed, "that is one ugly bird, Dad! Why did somebody jerk all the feathers off of its head and neck?"

As if it understood Billy's insults, the vulture spread his wings for balance and hopped along the tree branch away from the front of the enclosure.

Chuckling, Mr. Jones answered, "I think you might have hurt its feelings about being ugly, Billy. I am sure that the vulture's mother believes it is very beautiful."

"She must not be able to see very well then, because I agree with Billy ... it is ugly!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones.

"Well maybe, but feathers on the head of the vulture would get very messy when it eats smelly, rotting carrion. Their unfeathered bald head is easy to keep clean."

"What is carry-on, Dad?" asked Mary.

"That's carrion, Mary. Carrion is the decaying flesh of something dead. You see, after Adam sinned, death entered the world. The vulture is one of the ways God uses to clean up dead things. They are scavengers, mostly known for their practice of eating dead animals that die from natural causes, disease, and accidents like getting hit by a car. Every now

and then, vultures have also been known to attack young and helpless animals. When there is no dead meat to be found, they will even eat different kinds of seeds, grass, leaves, and even pumpkins."

"It says here that biologists once thought that the turkey vulture was a bird of prey and a raptor like hawks, owls, and eagles. But, today, because of DNA tests, scientists believe that they belong in the *stork* family," said Mrs. Jones. "Look at how the turkey vulture's beak curves at the end. It uses its beak as a ripping tool. Even though the turkey vulture usually begins eating

softer parts first, such as the eye, its beak is strong and powerful enough to rip tough hide. Notice their feet don't have powerful talons like an eagle or hawk. They look more like the feet of chickens. Turkey vultures use their feet for walking, hopping, and running ... not holding on to prey."

"I still think he's ugly," giggled Billy. Again, as if it understood, the turkey vulture gave a groan and soft hiss, and then stretching his neck, it swiftly vomited towards Billy. Fortunately for Billy, the front of the enclosure was made of glass! Startled, Billy took a big leap backwards.

Laughing, Mary said, "It says here that turkey vultures vomit when disturbed. I think you hurt its feelings again, Billy, and it's trying to scare you away!



And look, it also says that they don't have a voicebox (syrinx), so they can't sing or call. That is why it hissed at you."

"Turkey vultures are found throughout most of North America and all the deserts of the Southwest," said Mr. Jones. "They are one of North America's largest birds. They can grow up to 32 inches long and have a wing span of 6 feet. It is easy to tell flying turkey vultures apart from other birds because they hold their wings at a V-angle called a dihedral. Many airplanes wings today are copies of the vulture's 'V' shape because it works so well for soaring. The turkey vulture can soar for miles, very seldom flapping its wings. It will rock from side to side (unlike eagles or hawks), catching heat thermals that raise it up in the sky. As it soars, it uses its sense of smell and keen sight to find dead smelly things to eat. The turkey vulture's sense of smell is so powerful it can even smell dead things in a thick forest that its eyes can't see."

"To me, one of the most amazing things about a turkey vulture is its immune system," continued Mr. Jones. "It can eat a rotten diseased animal and not get sick or die. God designed its digestive system to work so well that the vulture's droppings are also disease free. This helps get rid of the disease so that it doesn't hurt other animal or people. Scientists are studying the turkey vulture to see if we can find better ways to stop diseases. All in all, the turkey vulture is just one more wonderful creature that shows it could only have been designed by God."

"Yeah, that's true, Dad," smiled Billy. "But why did God have to make it so ugly!"

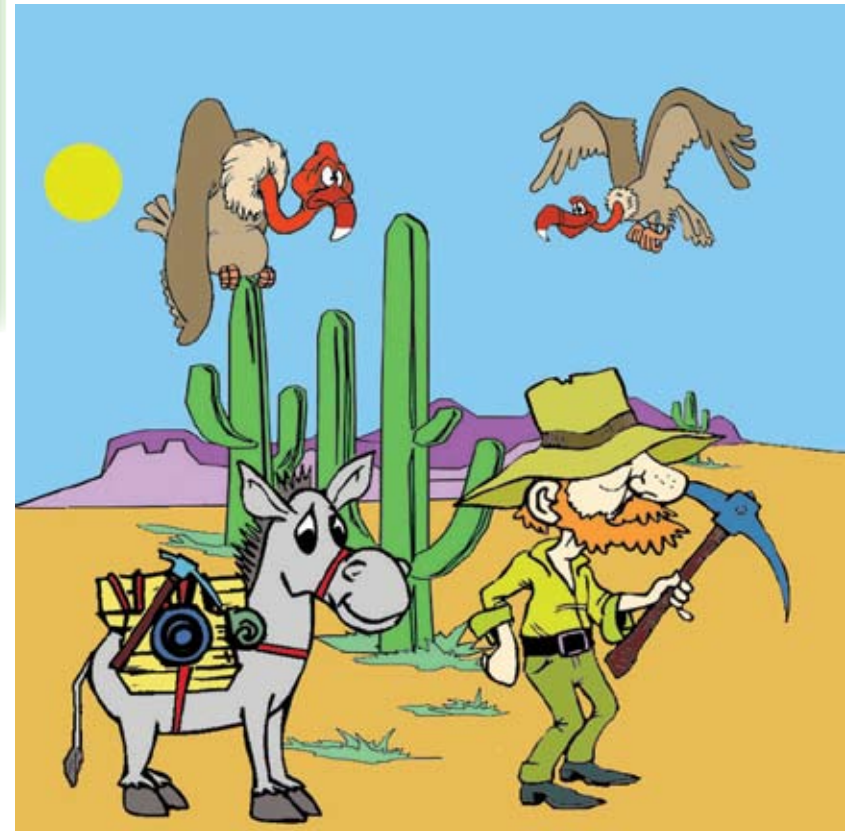
### ANSWERS FOR BACK PAGE

ON SITTING VULTURE: 1. Tail 2. Feet 3. Shoulder ON FLYING VULTURE: 4. Beak 5. Wing 6. Tail 7. Lip 8. Bridle 9. Ears 10. Belly strap 11. Chest strap 12. Pickle head 13. Gold pan. ON PROSPECTOR: 14. Hat crown 15. Moustache 16. Band on hat 17. Pick handle 18. Belt 19. Boots SCENERY: 20. Bush on ground 21. Small cactus 22. Middle cactus branch 23. Mountain on left 24. Mountain on right 25. Sun.

D O V E K C I L W O O D P E C K E R D J  
 K O C W A N G W X B S Z V Z E S A V G C  
 C H A N C I T O P I F T U F F G U R G W  
 U H A P U B N E A G L E R O U X I G K I  
 D R E A C O A P S H U M M I N G B I R D  
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 X S G T C R H V U L T U R E Q C B Y P U  
 P I G E O N P E L I C A N P R F R Z D W

Look for the name  
 of birds in the  
 puzzle on left  
 from the WORD  
 LIST below. The  
 hidden word  
 might be up, down,  
 sideways, slanted,  
 or backwards.  
 Answers at bottom  
 corner.

Can you find the 25 differences between the two pictures?  
 The answers can be found on front page.



WORD LIST

- CANARY
- CROW
- CUCKOO
- DOVE
- DUCK
- EAGLE
- FALCON
- GOOSE
- HAWK
- HUMMINGBIRD
- OSTRICH
- OWL
- PARAKEET
- PARROT
- PELICAN
- PHEASANT
- PIGEON
- QUAIL
- ROBIN
- SWAN
- VULTURE
- WOODPECKER

