

# NESTING TURKEY VULTURE NEAR BIGGAR, SASKATCHEWAN

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In late June of 1983, Jack de Bussac informed me of a strange bird he and a local farmer, Norman Smith, had observed while fixing a tractor tire approximately 35 km northeast of Biggar. From the brief description Jack gave me — a large black hawk with a “bald” head — I was almost certain the bird in question was a Turkey Vulture. When he later told me that Norm had referred to the bird as a “Turkey Buzzard” which was nesting in the vicinity, I immediately made arrangements to have him show me the abandoned farmstead where the sighting had occurred. A phone call to Smith the next day confirmed that there was indeed a pair of vultures with a nest in the attic of an abandoned house six km northeast of his place.

On the evening of 7 July, de Bussac, Robert Wapple and the author arrived at Smith's house to check if the birds were still present.

He advised us that they were and gave us permission to check on them if we wanted. Within five minutes we pulled in to the old farmstead which consisted of a house, barn and a few sheds surrounded by poplars, maples and carraganas on the north and west sides. (*Fig. 1*). We parked near the house and cautiously approached the building on foot, not knowing what to expect. Just as we stopped at the east side of the house, there was a commotion inside the attic. Seconds later an adult Turkey Vulture flapped out the window, startling us! The window was approximately four m above the ground, 45 cm wide by 120 cm high. (*Fig. 2*). The adult bird flew low around the farmyard for several minutes as we positioned a ladder underneath the window for further investigation. As I climbed the ladder however, the vulture flew to the north and was not seen again during the course of our visit, which lasted 20 minutes.



Figure 1. *Abandoned farmstead northeast of Biggar where vultures nested in 1983*





Figure 2. *View of east side of house where vulture nest was located; adult flushed from upper window*

In the darkened attic there was a most unpleasant odour. It wasn't too offensive though, and I began to search for the eggs or young among the sawdust and wood chips which covered the entire floor. Stepping lightly over the beams (hoping the roof would support my weight!), I noticed a slight movement in the extreme northwest corner of the attic. There were two nestlings completely with white down, except for their black faces. My estimate is that they were seven to ten days old. When I moved closer, the young withdrew clumsily into the corner. Even at this early stage of development, the birds appeared to recognize me as a threat — both hissing continuously and spreading their wings upon my approach. When I attempted to capture one of the young to show my cousin and brother, the bird promptly left me with a couple of gashes on my arm! No further harm was done however, and I quickly returned it to the attic. We then left the farm to talk to Norm Smith about this unusual find. He related to us that since moving to his farm in 1976, the vultures had nested four times at this location and one

other nearby abandoned homestead.

In the afternoon of 25 July, I made a return visit to the site. This time no adults were observed in the area. Both young again retreated to the corner of the attic, hissing loudly and snapping their bills, while spreading their rapidly developing wings. To my surprise, they had more than doubled in size. The body plumage still consisted mostly of down, but the primary and secondary feathers on the wings were quite advanced. The odour of decaying animal matter on a hot July day in the cramped quarters of the attic is a smell I will not soon forget! This was my last visit to the house. On 12 September, Smith phoned to let me know one juvenile was flying, while the other bird had moved "downstairs", apparently not yet strong enough to take wing. While birding ten km southeast of the nest-site on 13 September, I noted an adult vulture soaring south, possibly one of the parents.

A search through the literature in my library, produced only two references to vultures nesting in



similar circumstances. In both instances, the birds chose the floor of abandoned barns.<sup>1</sup> Most nests are located in caves, hollow logs or dense undergrowth. Houston's summary of breeding locations in Saskatchewan also listed various examples of ground nesting in the 12 areas reported, as did Schmidt.<sup>2 3</sup> In conclusion, the vulture breeding record near Biggar appears to be quite unique. The birds did not nest in either locality in 1984. (Norm Smith, pers. comm.)

Turkey Vultures are listed as rare transients in the Rosetown-Biggar district, immediately south of this observation, by Renaud and Renaud.<sup>4</sup> They listed six records for the species up until 1975. Since then, there have been only two other occasions when vultures have been reported: 14 May 1976, a single adult

over Biggar;<sup>5</sup> 6 June 1982, one adult noted by the author, 30 km west of Biggar.

<sup>1</sup>BENT, A.C. 1961. Life histories of North American birds of prey. Volume 1. Dover Reprint. New York. 409 pp.

<sup>2</sup>HOUSTON, C.S. 1969. Turkey Vulture breeding records in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 27(1):37-38.

<sup>3</sup>SCHMIDT, J.W. 1973. Cave-nesting Turkey Vultures of the South Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 31(1):58.

<sup>4</sup>RENAUD, W.E. & D. H. RENAUD. 1975. Birds of the Rosetown-Biggar District, Saskatchewan. S.N.H.S. Special Publication No. 9. 120 pp.

<sup>5</sup>WAPPLE, G.J. 1976. Additions to "Birds of the Rosetown-Biggar District, Saskatchewan". *Blue Jay* 35(3):157-160.

## ABANDONED HOUSE NEST SITE FOR TURKEY VULTURE

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Part of my job as Regional Wildlife Biologist with Saskatchewan Parks and Renewable Resources is to look into the possibility of improving habitat conditions on Wildlife Development Fund Lands to increase wildlife production. On 15 June 1984 Dan McGill, Conservation Officer at Preeceville, and I were carrying out a habitat investigation on WDF land north of Preeceville, Saskatchewan. A local land owner had contacted McGill about rebreaking and seeding to alfalfa a 15 acre field. The first cut

of alfalfa (cut after the nesting season) would be sold to the farmer with the money going back into the Wildlife Development Fund and the second cut would be left standing to provide an increased food source for White-tailed Deer and Elk and cover for upland game birds, waterfowl and other species of birds and mammals.

Overlooking the field, was a small abandoned two story house which we investigated. The house was a log structure in very poor condition. I