SIX YEARS OF TURKEY VULTURE WING-TAGGING

C. STUART HOUSTON, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0J8,_E-mail: <stuart.houston@usask.ca>; BRENTON TERRY, 64 MacLean Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7J 3R7; MARTEN J. STOFFEL, Box 183, RR#4, SASKATOON, SK S7K 3J7; and MICHAEL BLOM, 875 Wedgewood Court, Peterborough, ON K9J 7T8.

Since 2003, we have fitted 347 nestling Turkey Vultures with patagial (wing) tags (Table 1). The subsequent locations of sightings of wing-tags, often substantiated by photographs, provide intriguing information. Two were recorded at the Maracaibo Zoo in Venezuela, 5658 and 5696 km from the nest of origin. The first had been photographed at the zoo at 2 years of age on 8 November 2005; the zoo location was mapped in Figure 1 of Houston et al.² On 14 November 2008, a second vulture reached the same zoo, 3 months after tagging, when it was about 5 months old. These two are each shown with an asterisk in Table 1.

Four North American recoveries of dead vultures (one each at 3 years and 2 years and two at 1 year, all of them tagged in 2005;) and 25 North American sightings of 18 live vultures occurred 1 to 5 years after tagging (Table 1). Six vultures were sighted outside of Saskatchewan: two in Alberta, one in Manitoba, and one each in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota (Fig. 1). The vulture sighted in Montana at 2 years also became the fifth double sighting when it returned to Saskatchewan, only 36 km from its nest of origin, at 3 years.

The remaining four multiple sightings were reported only within

Table 1: Numbers of nestling Turkey Vultures (n = 24), >1 year or >4000 km, tagged each year, with numbers encountered in subsequent years. To calculate % nestlings encountered, each vulture was counted only once.

Year	# nests	# tagged	>4000 km <1 yr	1 yr	2 yr	3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	Total # encountered	Total # individuals	% individuals
2003	9	14		1	1*	1	1	2 ⁺	6	4	29
2004	17	30		2	1	1	4		8	5	17
2005	29	43		3	2	3			8	7	16
2006	46	84		4	2				6	6	7
2007	43	78		1					1	1	1
2008	56	98	1*						1	1	1
TOTAL	200	347	1	11	6	5	5	2	30	24	7
* = in Venezuela											

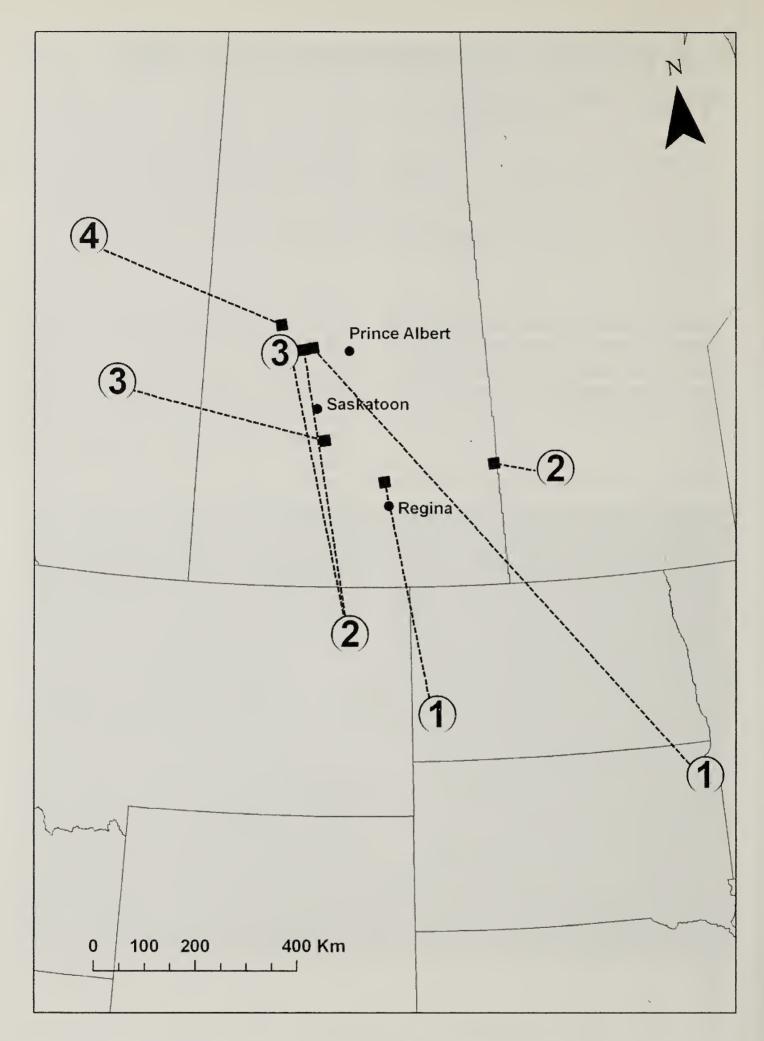


Figure 1. Vulture wing tags (6) sighted outside Saskatchewan, but omitting two sighted in Venezuela. Nest of origin is a square; the number within the circle indicates the number of years elapsed before the sighting at that point. The dotted line is diagrammatic and does not represent the route of travel during the elapsed year(s). The vulture sighted in Montana at 2 years had returned to within 36 km of its nest of origin at 3 years.

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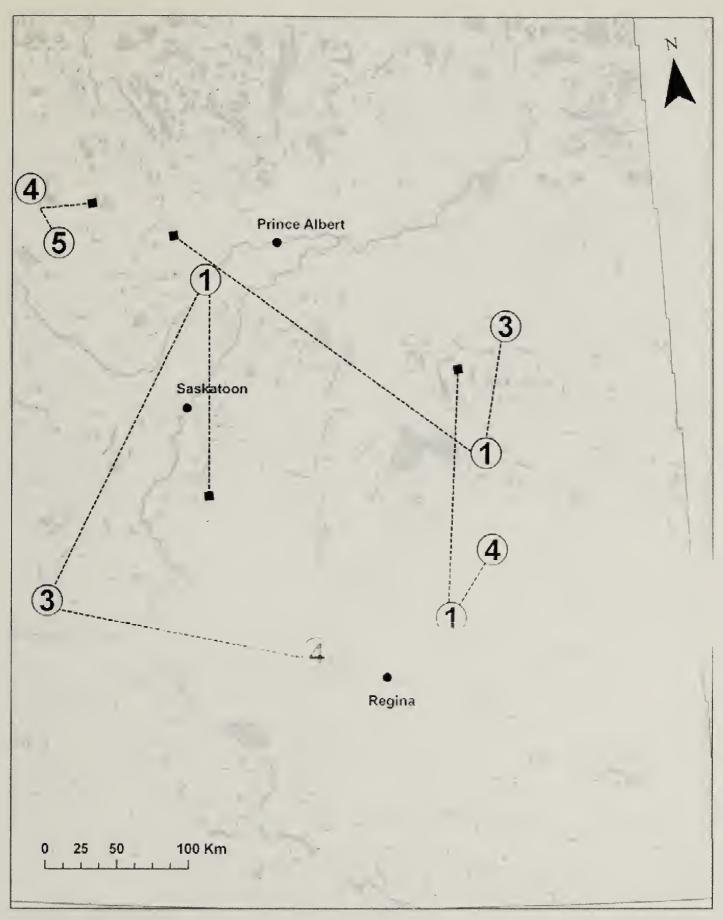


Figure 2. Vulture wing-tags (4) sighted >1 year, more than once.

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Saskatchewan. Of these, three were encountered two times: from a nest at Bapaume to Cater at 4 years and Robinhood at 5 years; from Mont Nebo to Fishing Lake at 1 year and Chelan at 3 years; and from Archerwill to Fort Qu'Appelle at 1 year and Ituna at 4 years. The fourth was encountered

three times, from a nest at Hanley north to Shellbrook at 1 year, south to Kyle at 3 years, and east to Buffalo Pound Lake at 4 years (Fig. 2). On 12 occasions, 12 different vultures were encountered once each at 5, 4, and 3 years; three at 2 years, and six at 1 year (Fig. 3).

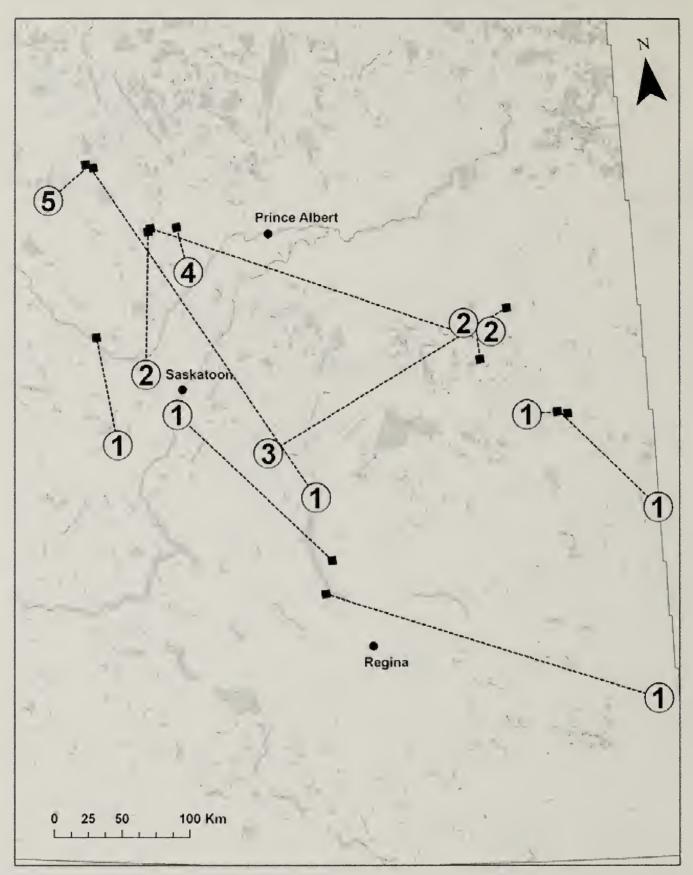


Figure 3. Vulture wing-tags (12) sighted >1 year, only once.

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The percentage of encounters increased with years elapsed since tagging (Table 1), which is opposite to other studies of marked birds, where sighting numbers typically are halved each consecutive year after marking (e.g., Great Horned Owls¹). To explain sightings increasing in frequency with age, one might postulate that many

vultures, 1 and 2 years after tagging, do not return to or near Saskatchewan, where the public is more likely to be aware of vulture tagging and to whom to report. Tagged vultures sighted at 1 year were an average of 267 km from their nest of origin (n=12). This distance declined to 210 km (n=5) in the second year, 207 km (n=5) in the

third year, 147 km (n=5) in the fourth year, and 37 km (n=3) in the fifth year. In Wisconsin, a 10-year (1983–1993) study of wing-tagged vultures showed that "if a fledgling eventually returns ... it typically makes its reappearance during its third year" (Michael J. Mossman, pers. comm.).

Readers should be on the watch for tagged vultures, as tagged examples of these long-lived birds increase in numbers each year. We will watch closely in 2009 and 2010 for evidence that this species can begin breeding as early as 6 or 7 years; the only breeding Turkey Vulture of known age in North America to date was 11 years old.³ That vulture, LeftGreen-11, probably hatched in late May 1986, was tagged in July, and fledged in August 1986. It did not return until 15 April 1989, just short of 3 years of age. On 2

June 1997, this vulture was an adult on two eggs in a different outcrop nest, only 1.2 km from its natal site, at or near 11 years of age (Michael J. Mossman, pers. comm.)

Acknowledgements

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- 1. HOUSTON, C.S. 1978. Recoveries of Saskatchewan-banded Great Horned Owls. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 92:61-66.
- 2. HOUSTON, C.S., G.L. HOLROYD, B. TERRY, M. BLOM, and M.J. STOFFEL. 2007. Tracking Saskatchewan nestling Turkey Vultures. *Blue Jay* 65:201-207.
- 3. KIRK, D.A. and M.J. MOSSMAN. 1998. Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Birds of North America #339.



SPRING

April has its way does what it will with spring—blustery cold its wind a sullen overcast its skies and dabs of dirty crusted snow patched on a greasy field

Two sharp-tailed grouse in buffs of browns—crested, sedate, alert—step mincingly about the hummocky stubble plowed last fall toe the mud and snow and bleached and matted straw for food, here better fare than winter's sparse lean peckings

Two meadowlarks arrivals from the south drop in, all unannounced at once assume they're fellow grouse or quail-like cousins stride and weave among the larger birds their tails a-flick, their knowing beaks poking likely spots for seeds or bugs their striking yellow breasts a sign of spring a sudden warm world's welcome to the season

-Victor C. Friesen