

TURKEY VULTURE NESTS IN ABANDONED BUILDINGS IN SW MANITOBA

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Introduction

Turkey Vultures are summer breeding residents in Manitoba^{6,8} and found as the subspecies *Cathartes aura meridionalis* Swann 1921.¹⁸ Their range within this province is from the boreal forests of Nopiming and Whiteshell parks in the east, to the mixed woods of the Spruce Woods, Turtle Mountain, Riding Mountain, and Duck Mountain parks in the west. To date, only a few records have been kept to follow their breeding population and distribution in Manitoba.^{1,19,21,28,30}

In southwest Manitoba, the species is considered uncommon.⁸ Early accounts from the late 1800s described the species as summer residents near Carberry, and they were also seen in the Shell River area.²⁶ While no evidence was found, they were probably breeding. The species was known to breed, however, in the nearby Qu'Appelle region of Saskatchewan.²⁶ One observer mentioned in 1971 that the species was down in numbers in the Northern Great Plains from the 1930s.¹⁴

The Turkey Vulture declined in population in North America after the 1800s, at the same time as the demise of the bison.^{16,22} The species subsequently began to slowly increase its range throughout the continent, with a noticeable acceleration between 1920 and 1950 in the northeastern U.S. The most plausible reasons offered for this latter expansion were a warming



Nestling Turkey Vulture in farm attic
Dean Berezanski

climate, greater availability of roadkills, and loss of preferred habitat in the southern U.S.²⁹ Another acceleration was seen in the 1980s.^{10,17,23} A regional reduction in pesticide levels, more favourable climate, reduced human persecution, and increased food supply have been given as possible reasons for this latest expansion.^{7,18,23}

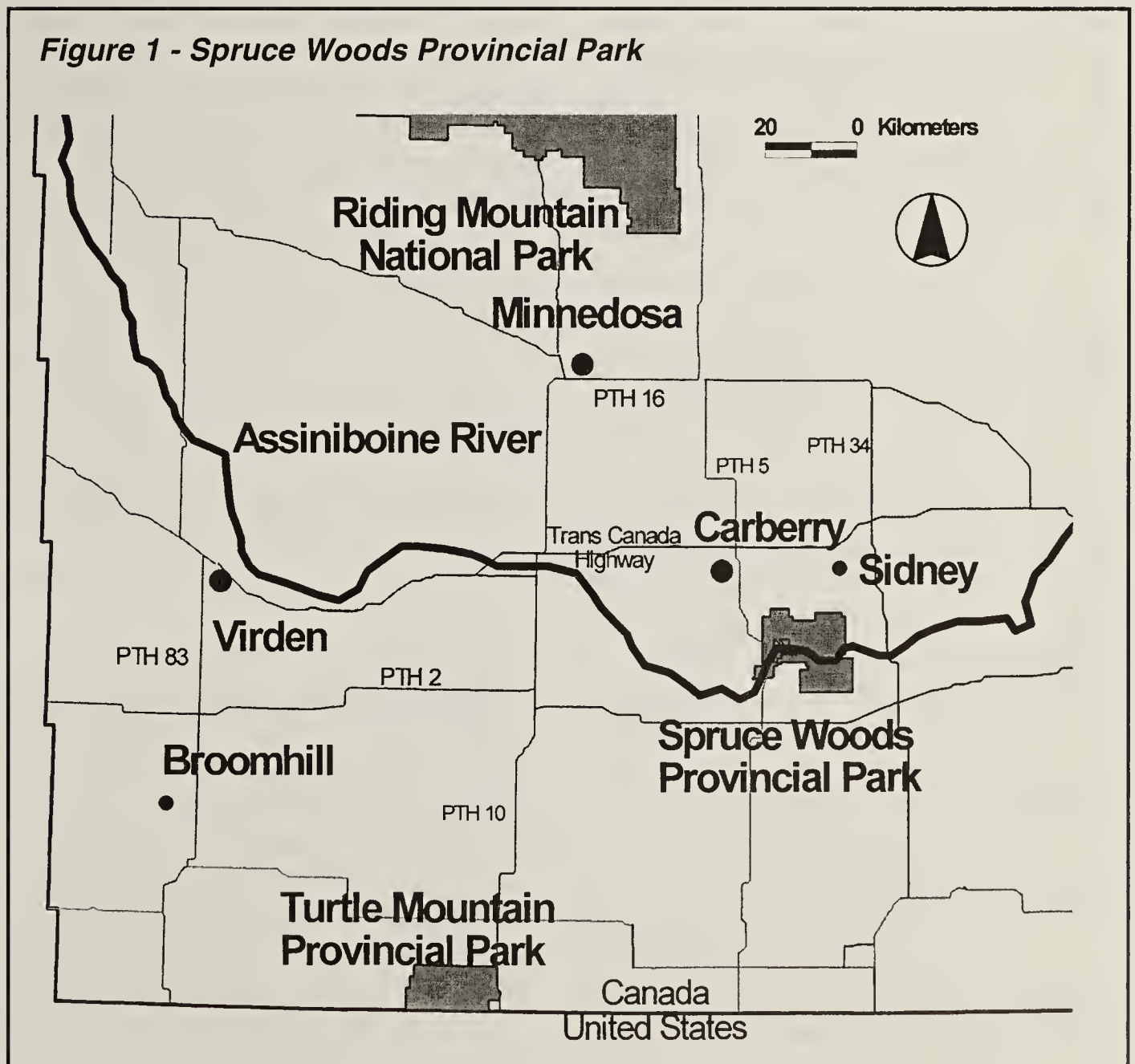
Isolation from human disturbance appears to be the most important requirement for Turkey Vulture nests.¹⁸ As for specific habitat, the birds are reportedly more numerous in lowland areas, perhaps because of an abundance of thicket and hollow tree breeding sites.¹⁶ The preferred breeding habitat in North America east of 100°W

includes mixed farmland and forest.^{15,18} Nests are usually on covered sites on the ground.^{2,12} In Canada, specific sites are typically holes in logs, cliffs, caves, and depressions on the ground.^{1,4,12,13,24,25,26,28} A small proportion of their nest sites have been found in abandoned buildings in Canada and in the United States.^{2,24,27,3,16} Extensive use of abandoned structures was, however, reported in southeast Illinois in a study between 1978 to 1983.⁵ Nesting sites are often used several years in a row. This paper compiles several contemporary accounts of their nests, both documented and suspected, in abandoned buildings in southwest Manitoba. Reasons for use of these sites and implications on their status in this province are discussed.

Documented Nesting Sites

Spruce Woods Provincial Park (SWPP) has at least two documented cases of Turkey Vultures nesting within the attics of abandoned houses (Figure 1). The Park (270 sq. km. in size) contains numerous farm buildings which were abandoned when the lands were purchased for Park establishment in the late 1960s. The first site became known to the author in mid-August 1988, when park staff observed a pair of immature Turkey Vultures roosting upon the roof of an abandoned farm house in the Assiniboine River valley during mid-morning (T. Blair pers. comm). Return trips in mornings over the next few weeks found these two juveniles roosting on the roof. Within the main

Figure 1 - Spruce Woods Provincial Park



floor of the house, no apparent signs of nesting were observed and no access to the attic was seen. In June 1989, a return to the same building led to the discovery of a second chimney opening in the roof to the attic. In the attic, amid debris and a putrid smell, was a single, nestling Turkey Vulture. When the attic was entered, the nestling gave a deep, warning hiss and a threat display by spreading its wings. No nesting material was obvious. The site was not inspected in subsequent years.

On 19 August, 1994, another abandoned house was inspected along the Assiniboine River within SWPP. A 'nest' (unlined scrape among debris on the floor) was found in the walking attic space of the house, with two young Turkey Vultures near fledgling age. They had only a few vestiges of down feathers remaining on their backs. One crawled out of an open window and onto the roof but did not fly. The site was not inspected in subsequent years (K. De Smet pers. comm.)

Documentation of another Turkey Vulture nest was located on 21 June, 1991 on Crown land in the Assiniboine River valley near Virden. This nest, as with the first two, was in an abandoned house in a back room on the second story. It contained two nestlings and, besides the presence of feces, no other material was present to suggest a nest structure. Entry by the adults was through an open window. Hissing and threat displays were also elicited from the vultures. The site was not inspected in subsequent years¹¹ (P. Ewashko pers. comm.).

Suspected Nesting sites

Turkey Vultures were seen repeatedly roosting on the roofs of least two other abandoned farm houses in the SWPP area. The locations were probably also

used for nesting although Turkey Vultures do use old buildings solely as roosting sites.¹⁸ One site was also reported in 1995 in the Assiniboine River valley within SWPP (D. Morton pers. comm.), but is no longer standing. Vultures had been seen at this location for as many as ten years prior to the report (B. Gillespie pers. comm.). Another location identified in mid-summer 1989 was south of Sidney (R. Hildebrand pers. comm.) on private land, but was not inspected in subsequent years.

Elsewhere in southwest Manitoba, an individual Turkey Vulture was seen soaring quite low near an abandoned house along the Assiniboine River on 2 May, 1990 near Virden (K. De Smet pers. comm.). A scrape was found among debris on the floor of an upstairs bedroom, but no eggs were in the scrape. This site was not checked again later. On 18 May, 1995, a pair of vultures was seen entering and leaving an old house near Broomhill. They were suspected to be inspecting it for nesting, but no nest or adults were present when the house was checked two weeks later (K. De Smet pers. comm.). Similarly, vultures have been seen exiting second-floor windows of three abandoned buildings west and southwest of Minnedosa in mid-summer (C. Cuthbert pers. comm.).

Discussion

Based on these preceding accounts, expansion of the breeding population of Turkey Vultures has almost certainly occurred in southwest Manitoba since the turn of the century. In addition, the relatively recent accounts from Saskatchewan of nesting in old buildings and the Manitoba nests suggest that Turkey Vultures may be expanding their range into prairie habitat by using abandoned buildings for nesting

habitats.^{2,27} Alternatively, the use of old buildings may be the result of a cumulative loss of traditional habitat, including undisturbed river valleys.

These documented cases of nests in abandoned buildings all have been within river valleys, with considerable relief in the landscape. The surrounding locales had a combination of agricultural fields in secondary succession and riparian and upland mixed wood stands. In addition, all three sites were on, or encircled by, designated Crown lands. Likewise, all of the suspected nest sites, except for the Broomhill one, were in locations with the same characteristics. One reason for an increase in finding these locations is probably due to the fact that Manitoba Natural Resources staff visit such sites frequently, as many are on designated lands.

Vultures may be using these lowland sites as one basis of range expansion, if natural sites were not available. Little data exists to correlate Turkey Vulture population declines with loss of habitat in southwaest Manitoba over the last century. The historic loss of river bottom habitats in southwest Manitoba to agriculture is, however, well-known.²⁰ The Manitoba-documented nest sites were found near rivers and on designated Crown lands, which often have the only intact habitats and buildings remaining.

The Turkey Vulture is already at the northern limits of its range in Manitoba. The Manitoba Conservation Data Centre lists the species as "S4B" - apparently secure and breeding, but of long-term concern in the province, as no definitive population monitoring or studies have been done on vultures in Manitoba.⁹ If range extension, natural habitat loss, or both have occurred, then abandoned buildings may need to be considered as critical habitat in Manitoba for the species.

Additional information on the vulture population and distribution is required to determine the status of the species in Manitoba. Such information is best collected through nest record cards submitted by amateur and professional vulture-watchers to the Prairie Nest Record Scheme at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg.

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