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from the field . . .

by Jack Clinton Eitnearer
McAllen, Texas

king vulture the only true rainforest vulture

The hours passed slowly in my canvas blind erected in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve in Belize, Central America. I had earlier placed several (dead) goats in a nearby ravine in hopes of observing the feeding behavior of the king vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*). Suddenly a great rush of air created waves across the top and sides of my blind. Soon the giant majestic black and white bird with its wing spread of seven feet and weight of over seven and a half pounds was in full view. Twisting and turning as it descended, it displayed with great precision how these large birds of prey have complete control over the winds and thermal currents. Having just landed, the vulture walked with powerful legs over to the carcasses and began feeding.

Like the Indian king vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) the American king undoubtedly received its title because of its behavioral attribute of displacing (being dominant over) the other smaller vultures. The American king also plays an important role in the opening of larger carcasses therefore facilitating the feeding on them by the other vultures and carrion feeding mammals. Being the only vulture that can penetrate the thick hides of domestic cattle and wild deer and tapir, I have observed countless times, a number of smaller black and turkey vultures perched with crested caracaras above roadkilled animals. Unable to open the hides they awaited the arrival of the king.

In areas of Mexico where the king vulture is no longer found, large animals are left to decompose by bacterial organisms if a wound was not created in the course of the killing of the animal.

Not documented feeding on snakes, small rodents or fish, the king soars, usually in pairs or alone, above the tropical forest and adjoining areas. They do feed on domestic livestock but are

wary of man's presence. Even at large kills seldom do you encounter a number of kings feeding. During three months of research on this species in Central America I recorded only three cases of more than five individuals feeding together. Not being terribly rare they appear to function better in smaller groups, which is rather unusual when one reviews the social nature of the remaining six species of New World (Cathartidae) vultures.

Ranging from Southern Mexico to Northern Argentina, the species is generally associated with the dense tropical forest. Frequently observed feeding on domestic livestock it has adapted well to man's alterations of the environment. Although the breeding requirements in the wild are not completely known, all the nests thus far discovered were in dense forests near rivers. It is my personal feeling that the specie's survival is closely tied to the forest. Although a number of kings have been discovered in South America in thorn forests they have not been recorded to have successfully reared young under those circumstances so may be simply existing and not viable.

It is interesting to note that the king vulture is abundant in areas where the scarlet macaw (*Ara Macao*) can also be found as along the Usumacinta River on both Mexico and Guatemala borders, and in the Guacamayo Forest Reserve in Belize. In areas where the scarlet macaw has not been recorded for some time the king too is only infrequently sighted as in the palenque ruins area in Chiapas, Mexico.

As the king vulture is not captured for the pet trade this is an excellent example of how habitat destruction affects all avian forms. The king is able to survive with man (although at a distance and only if man continues to mismanage his livestock) but the scarlet, except for occasional cornfield robbing, is not terribly adaptable.

One of the most interesting aspects of this species is its coloration. One of the topics under investigation by Niel Smith at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama is why large soaring birds are the colors that they are. Certainly this is an interesting question. The king vulture upon maturity (which requires from 5-6 years) is mainly creamy white with half the wings, rump and tail being black. Its neck is striking in coloration, being yellow, red, blue and purple in varying shades and getting more brilliant during courtship. To top off this "bewilderingly beautiful" coloration the iris is white. Both sexes are the same

in coloration but the young (one egg is laid and hatched after 52 days incubation) are black in color with a brown iris and require a number of years to develop adult plumage.

In captivity the species is fairly abundant and has bred on a number of occasions. A recently conducted census of vultures in captivity by the Vulture Study Group located over seventy specimens in the U.S. and Canada and eight facilities that had had success in breeding the species. The value of these captive birds far surpasses the obvious one of having a captive population that can be used to increase the natural one if problems arise. Such questions as the development of coloration, age at first breeding, innate behavior patterns, and the effects of being over and under weight on breeding results can easily be investigated in captivity. In terms of vulture management and conservation programs these answers are of great value. For example, it is well documented that Old World vultures during times of low food supply do not breed. If in captivity it is determined that a certain weight is required to stimulate breeding, an accurate indication could be determined by capture and weighing of wild birds as to their breeding success potential.

For the past several years the Vulture Study Group has been active in vulture research, education and conservation on the global scale. At the recently held World Conference on Birds of Prey conducted in Greece a number of sessions were devoted to vultures of both the Old and New World. Vulture Study Group members play an important role in the organization and participated throughout the conference. Anyone interested in further details about vultures or the Vulture Study Group should contact John Ledger, Chairman, Vulture Study Group, P.O. Box 4190, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa or write me in care of this magazine. ●

Photo, Robert Berry, Houston Zoological Gardens.



Young King Vulture (*Sarcorampus papa*)



Photo by Jack C. Eitner

Ranging from Veracruz, Mexico to Argentina, King Vultures are often observed as "specks in the sky" as they forage over their primary habitat, the tropical forest of the Americas. (Photo by The American, African and Indomalayan rainforest used to cover over 11 million sq. km. but now with logging and shifting cultivations perhaps only 1 million sq. km. of virgin rainforest remains.

King Vultures require up to six years to attain adult coloration,



Photo courtesy of Robert Berry, Houston Zoological Gardens