

## Return of the Buzzards



They are another one of those signs of spring, the turkey vultures (or buzzards, as most of us call them). Their arrival in the Big Bend is not based upon any uncanny knowledge of weather patterns, they seem to be more controlled by the calendar...their own, not ours. At my house the first buzzards usually appear during the second week of March. Just a few of them come in and settle on the hills or in the trees along the creek for a night or two and then they are gone. My older neighbors used to tell me these were the scouts, checking to see if the weather was okay for the rest of group. I have my doubts about that but the larger group of buzzards (called a kettle by some), usually appears the next week. This year, right on time, scouts were followed a week later by about 50 buzzards.

Seen from a distance, as it soars through the deep blue skies of the Big Bend country, the buzzard is beautiful, a master of air currents and crosswinds, the bird banks and circles, dives and climbs seemingly without effort. The long-evolved highly efficient flight utilizes rising hot air (thermals) to soar over this vast region.

The wingspan of a four pound buzzard is about six feet. The long, wide wings allow slow flight. The long flight feathers (called primaries) are attached to the arm bone in front and extend back. Unusually large muscles control the primaries, spreading them to increase wing surface to catch updrafts, contracting them to glide down. The adjustments are constant. The bones of the wings have been modified for this effortless form of flight. The shoulder girdle is more rigid, allowing greater wing support which makes it less tiring for long-term gliding. The joints in the wings rotate freely for subtle twists and turns.

Although it is the lone buzzard seen soaring in the afternoon skies, nights and mornings are usually spent at a common roost, either in trees, microwave towers or on cliffs. Nor are they very cordial to one another. Regularly, landing birds will crash into roosting buzzards, toppling them from their roosts. This is usually accompanied by some hissing and flapping of the wings of the disturbed bird.

One group of buzzards I have watched for 3 decades numbered more than 120 when I first started watching them in the summer of 1977. Their numbers have dropped to about 50 now. I just counted the latest flock to move in at about 60 birds. But that number will decrease over the next couple of weeks as some of them will move farther north. One of my neighbors, now departed, said that today's numbers are significantly less than when the screw worm fly caused massive death and dying of wildlife throughout the border country in the early 1950s.

When the sun rises the buzzard seeks a sun spot, usually with others from the roost. This spot may be the top of a tree or the top of a cliff. It could be a fence post or a roof line. Much of the morning is spent standing with wings extended to get the full benefit of the sun's rays. The exact function of this activity is open to speculation, some think it aids in thermoregulation, allowing the bird to absorb warmth after a cool night in the trees. They also spend some of this time preening (grooming) their feathers and removing lice and other parasites they may have picked up during the night.

Not all buzzards we see in the sky sleep with the flock at night. Some males and females have formed pairs and gone off to raise families. The male and female choose an isolated, fairly inaccessible cliff to lay their eggs. No nest is build and the eggs are laid on bare rock. The eggs will hatch into ungainly birds covered with cottony white down. When disturbed the young will hiss loudly and clack their sharp bills. After ten weeks they get their juvenile plumage and start learning to fly and soar.

With its sharp eyesight the buzzard can locate dead and dying animals from its vantage point high in the sky. However, the bird also has large nostrils with many

smell receptors, enabling it to track down smelly, decomposing foods. While their dietary predilections may seem unsavory to us, it allows them to fill an important niche in the Big Bend country as a recycler, returning nutrients to the ecosystem.

**POSTED BY Patt Sims - March, 2011**