



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

May 24, 2024

Partners in Sanitation, the Turkey Vulture

On May 15, 2024, an adult Turkey Vulture was brought into CWC after being hit by a car in a residential neighborhood in Newhall, CA. Turkey Vultures are genuinely quiet, intelligent birds, with interesting personalities and a striking appearance. They average a height of 2 ½ feet and have a wingspan that extends up to six feet. These birds are easy to spot with their small bald reddish heads and sharp white beaks.

The patient in care is being treated for road rash across their back, head and face abrasions, elbow swelling and severe tail bruising. Luckily, the bird sustained no bone breaks but due to the severity of the bruising, pain medication is being given regularly and the vulture is confined to a small enclosure to restrict their movement while they rest and recover. Soon the patient will be moved to an outdoor mew; they will not be able to take flight but will have space to stretch and strengthen their wings.

We are hopeful that after a week-long stay in the mew, the patient will be moved to a 100-ft aviary where they will stay for another 2-4 weeks. The large aviary will serve as the last enclosure the Turkey Vulture will stay in during their rehabilitative journey. The enclosure will provide ample space to practice and strengthen their flying skills and prepare for a successful release back into the wild. The prognosis of the Turkey Vulture is good, and our veterinarian is optimistic that the patient will make a full recovery.

Have you ever noticed a group of vultures circling up ahead? Chances are they were scoping out their next meal. Turkey Vultures have an exceptional sense of smell which allows them to smell their food from up to a mile away and sometimes through large dense tree canopies. In fact, Turkey Vultures have the largest olfactory system of all bird species. They are carnivorous scavengers and feed on dead animals (carrion). While this may sound distasteful, their feeding behavior plays an incredibly important role in our environment.

Without scavengers like the Turkey Vulture, carcasses on the side of the road would be far more prevalent. Additionally, they play a vital role in limiting the spread of disease. Turkey Vultures have stomach acid that is very effective at killing bacteria and disease. Vultures can eat animals who had rabies, exposure to anthrax, and other sicknesses without contracting it. Turkey Vultures not only dispose of carrion that would have rot for an unknown amount of time but also prevent other animals from eating potentially infectious meat, stopping the spread of disease in its tracks!



CWC wildlife technician examines Turkey Vulture.



Past patient in care at CWC.



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Past patient shows off their impressive wingspan.

Turkey Vultures share the same territory as humans, though their nests are in more isolated settings like on ledges, abandoned hawk nests and caves. They rarely build full nests and usually find their nesting spot in a sheltered place that has already been established. Turkey Vultures generally lay two eggs that are incubated by both parents. Once hatched, one parent stays with their young and both parents work together to feed their hatchling. These magnificent birds can live from 10-16 years in the wild!

These birds serve an important role in the ecosystem. Our team is hopeful that this Turkey Vulture will be ready to be released in the next month or so to continue their important job out in the wild.