

TURKEY VULTURES FEEDING ON LIVE WESTERN TOAD TOADLETS

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The Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) feeds primarily on carrion of wild and domestic mammals ranging from shrews and mice to large ungulates (Kirk and Mossman 1998). The species also feeds on a wide variety of small and large wild and domestic birds as well as dead fishes, amphibians, reptiles, stranded mussels, snails, grasshoppers, crickets, mayflies, and shrimp when they are available (Brock 1896, Keyes and Williams 1888, Pearson 1919, Tyler 1937, Rivers 1941, Rapp 1943, James and Neale 1986, Buckley 1996).

Occasionally the Turkey Vulture takes live food items but usually in situations where animals may be trapped, held captive, are sickly, or are anesthetized (Crider and McDaniel 1967, Mueller and Berger 1967, Glading and Glading 1970, Kirk and Mossman 1998). Bendire (1892) reports a Turkey Vulture gorged with “fresh” minnows that suggest they may have been taken alive in a natural setting.

In the early afternoon of 25 July 2005, I was travelling along the Sabiston Creek Road northwest of Kamloops Lake, British Columbia, when I noticed two Turkey Vultures circling low over a small roadside marsh (Figure 1). Cattle were feeding along the shore, and drinking from the marsh, so I suspected the vultures were attracted to the carcass of a dead cow. Soon I noticed three more vultures, 10-15 m apart, walking along the muddy shore among open patches of Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*). They were obviously feeding and so preoccupied that they did not notice me. Two vultures were on land feeding and one was standing in water, about 10 cm deep, also picking up food items and plucking some of them from the surface. I watched this feeding frenzy for about five minutes as the birds picked up small wiggling objects, swallowed them, and then walked to another feeding spot. Unfortunately a truck stopped thinking I needed assistance and the gorged vultures flew off. The site is at 762 m elevation.

When I examined the vulture feeding areas I found

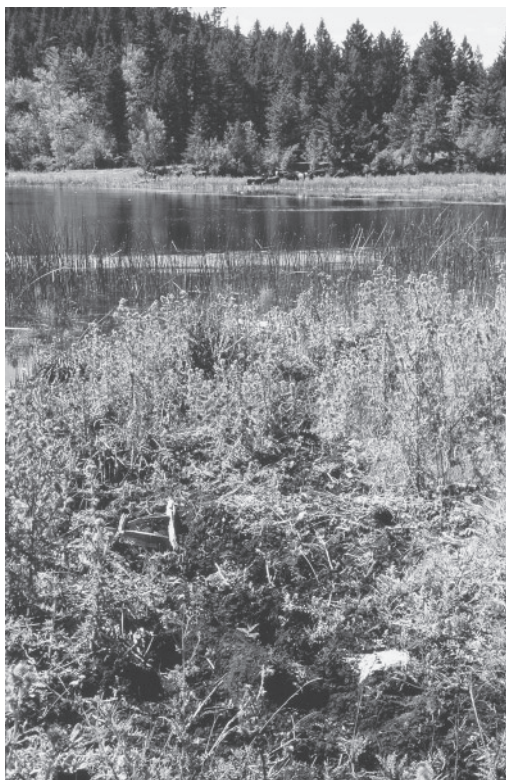


Figure 1. Shore area of a small roadside marsh where Turkey Vultures preyed on live Western Toad toadlets. Near Sabiston Creek, BC. 25 July 2005 (R. Wayne Campbell).

thousands of Western Toad (*Bufo boreas*) toadlets hopping about in all directions. Most were on land and ranged in size from 1.9-2.5 cm in length (Figure 2). Those in the water were floating and swimming. Jackson et al. (1978) report an instance of a Turkey Vulture wading in water and snatching a live fish and walking back to shore where it consumed its catch. The Turkey Vulture is an opportunistic feeder that may use different foraging tactics and food items when alternative food sources become available.

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Figure 2. High concentration of Western Toad toadlets on damp shore of roadside marsh near Sabiston Creek, BC. 25 July 2005 (R. Wayne Campbell). BC Photo 3573.

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