

A RECORD OF COMPLETE ALBINISM IN A  
TURKEY VULTURE FROM OKLAHOMA

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Thorough reviews of albinism in North American birds were conducted by Ross (1963) and Gross (1965). They found that records of complete, or total, albinism, which is characterized by white feathers, pink or red eyes, and very pale or white legs and bill, are much rarer than those of incomplete albinism. Among the 1847 occurrences reported by Gross (1965), only 7% were totally albinistic. Furthermore, instances of this phenomenon among birds of prey are comparatively rare, particularly in vultures. This paper documents the first known record of complete albinism in the Family Cathartidae.

On 8 January 1992, I discovered a white Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) specimen (OSU No. 2510) in the Oklahoma State University Museum in Stillwater (Figs. 1 and 2). It was an adult, but the sex had not been determined. It was probably prepared by Dale Long, whose name appears on the oversized label. This bird had been shot about 4 miles west of Aline, in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma, on 18 September 1979 and brought, still alive, to the nearby Great Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge. It was forcibly fed and dusted with pesticide due to its heavy infestation of lice. The next morning the vulture was dead. Its weight was 929 g., and measurements (in mm) were: total length 679, wingspan 1678, wing 508, tail 265, tarsus 64.2, culmen 58.9, and middle toe 95.4. Eye color was noted as pink, bill and talons white, legs tannish-white and the scattered small head feathers were white.

ALBINO TURKEY VULTURE



Dorsal (left) and ventral (right) sides of a complete albino Turkey Vulture (OSU No. 2510) from Alfalfa County, Oklahoma. Photos by the author.

Of the few known records of albinism for North American vultures, Gross (1965) listed 12, while Ross (1963) mentioned one for the Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and eight for *Cathartes aura*. These records overlap to some extent and almost without exception were sightings; few albinistic specimens exist in museum collections. The Black Vulture was reported to be an "unmistakable albino" but, because it was a visual record, there was no way to determine whether this bird was a complete albino or not. Of the Turkey Vulture records, six were sightings of partial albinos, including those published by Allaire (1977), Jones (1933), and Nicholson (1896), one was a light gray imperfect albino specimen in the United States National Museum, and another a completely white study skin housed in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH No. 2804). This latter specimen bears no information except the donor's name, but is thought to have been obtained in the 1870s (M. LeCroy, pers. comm.). Again, its degree of albinism cannot be ascertained because the eye color was not recorded.

Since the reviews by Ross (1963) and Gross (1965), other sight records of albinistic Turkey Vultures have been given by Davis (1970) and Voelker (1976), respectively. The former record was of an incomplete albino captured on 29 August 1970 in Mount Sterling, Illinois. It was completely white, but had dark eyes. This bird was found alongside a road unable to fly. For several days it was maintained in captivity and was dusted with DDT to treat its louse infestation before being released. Voelker's (1976) bird had a white tail and scattered white feathers on the body.

Albinism results from a genetic change that inhibits the formation of the enzyme tyrosinase which is responsible for the synthesis of melanin. Complete albinos often have weak eyesight due to lack of depth perception, and brittle wing and tail feathers, which may impede their ability to fly. Frequently, they are harassed by conspecifics, are more conspicuous to predators than normally pigmented birds, and are thought to be at a disadvantage in mate selection (Witkop, 1975; Terres, 1980). These factors lead to a decreased survival rate among total albinos in the wild (Witkop, 1975).

I thank N. Jobe and W. Stark for helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript and M. LeCroy for information on the specimen at the American Museum.

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