RECREATION REPORT

SPRING BEAR HUNT PREVIEW

• Pine Creek-Keating-Catherine Creek (Hunt 762A)

The district experienced higher than average snowfall in the mid to upper elevations. Hunters should expect access to be relatively limited early in the season with access to high elevations by mid to late season. Look for bears in areas of early green-up. Usually south-facing slopes are the first to become snow-free and can be good places to glass for bears. In the Keating Unit, hunters will find better access in some of the mid to low portions of the national forest. Higher elevations near Pine Creek and McGraw Overlook will have deep snow early in the season but should become accessible by mid to late season.

The Catherine Creek Unit will produce good bear numbers this year. Much of the unit's lower elevations are on private land. The higher elevations of the Catherine Creek Unit are mostly within the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and contain excellent bear habitat. Snow may limit access to the highest elevations in April but should open up by mid-season.

• Lookout Mountain Unit (764)

Moderate snow at mid to high elevations will limited access in the early season. Try south-facing slopes near the timberline above Brownlee Reservoir. Private lands limit access; make sure you obtain landowner permission before hunting private land.

• Starkey-Ukiah (Hunt 752A, season April 15 – May 31)

Bear numbers are strong in both the Starkey and Ukiah Units. Late snowfall created deep snowpack in both units, which will limit hunter access early in the season. Vehicle access will be a challenge throughout April. When the snowpack begins to melt look to lower elevation access points in Union and Umatilla counties for hunting locations.

• Wallowa District Hunts (Season April 15-May 31)

Access is expected to be difficult, due to snow drifts, until early May in most units. While it is still early for bear activity, south-facing slopes are already beginning to green up at low and midelevations. Bear activity will depend on weather patterns in April and warm weather will result in more bear activity. Bear numbers should be high again this year with most found in canyon areas early in the season.

Turkey Vultures: A sign that spring has arrived

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photo

The Soaring Scavengers

THE LAY OF THE LAND

ETHAN SHAW

Fine as bursting buds, high-spirited calves, and courting songbirds are, much of what I like about spring tends toward the grungier side of things.

I like, for instance, the messiness of thaw-out and melt-off: the swollen creeks and rivers (when they aren't causing trouble, that is), the meltwater rills draining under and out of the foothill snowdrifts, the outlaw snowbanks hiding out along shady gullies and pasture windbreaks.

And then there's my signal bird of the season: not a colorful warbler or stately sandhill, but that dark, silent, skull-faced scavenger the turkey vulture (or "buzzard").

I saw my first vultures of the year on March 22 from up in the Bridge Creek foothills above Cove. Pausing amid deep, slushy snow to scan the great cliffbands of the Mount Fanny massif, listening to the guttural conversation of a raven pair, I noticed two black boomerangs sail out from above the rim and toward the bright valley beyond. The ragged birds seemed to make a slight detour to circle high above me before drawing their wings to crescents and coasting westward.

Now I'm seeing our small loose gang of vultures here on the east side of the Grande Ronde Valley just about daily: on their morning and evening flights to and from night roosts, teetering along the updrafts against the Wallowa scarp, spiraling to impressive altitudes in the overhead blue.

Turkey vultures are weak flyers, reliant on thermals and winds more than musclepower to do most of their getting around. You'll often see them poised in their night-roost trees in the morning, maybe sunning their tattered wingspreads, waiting out the heavy humid cool for lofting air parcels and breezes to arise. Whether taking off or adjusting course midflight, the vulture's wingbeats are deep and labored.

(That first-vulture day of March, the raven pair I'd been listening to seemed to mock the carrion birds' simple soaring by taking to the skyway just after them and executing some masterful barrel rolls and swoops.)

Yet few birds of ours so expertly ride the air as the turkey vulture. Its aversion to active flight makes it a nearly nonstop soarer: tottering about on crooked wings, circling up one thermal and then gliding down to the base of the next to climb back into the heights. On a deathly calm day, a passing vulture's slow, weaving float (like a harrier's) can seem physics-defying. In strong gusts, meanwhile, the vulture is tossed about this way and that, unfazed: a wavering, windblown scrap.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photo

The turkey vulture's bald red head is an adaptation to help the bird root around in carcasses.

In flight, the vulture mostly appears black, but when in its lazy circling its gray underwing catches the light the bird glints silver.

Another hallmark of the turkey vulture: its silence. Squabbling with its kind, it may issue a kind of godforsaken hiss, and you can hear a rush of air across feathers from a close flyby, but otherwise it hangs and drifts in the sky as a mute observer of things below.

What the turkey vulture is seeking in its airborne wandering is, of course, dead meat. Its naked red head is an adaptation for rooting around carcasses. It's an adaptation shared with the other New World vultures — including the California condor that once cast huge shadows over Northeastern Oregon — as well as many Old World vultures, which aren't actually closely related to their American counterparts: The similar look and habits result from convergent evolution, not shared lineage.

The vultures of Africa and Eurasia find carrion by sight; so does the American black vulture that overlaps extensively with the turkey vulture in the southern U.S. and down into the Neotropics, and so do the condors. The turkey vulture, however, along with its tropical cousins the yellow-headed vultures, has the gift of a fine sense of smell for sniffing out rotting meat. (Not too rotting, mind you: The vultures prefer freshly expired fare, and turn up their noses, so to speak, at real putrefaction.) A 2017 study measuring the relative size of the olfactory bulb — a part of the vertebrate forebrain involved in processing scent — in more than 140 bird species found the turkey vulture's heftier than all the rest.

The reliance of black vultures (as well as Old World vultures) on eyeballing carcasses seems to limit their scavenging to fairly open country, but the turkey vulture's prowess at scenting hidden meals means it can forage over dense woodland and forest. (It also allows the turkey vulture to zero in on even quite small dead critters, whereas the black vulture mostly attends bigger, and thus more easily seen, carcasses, often in large flocks — or "wakes," as groups of feeding vultures are grimly called.)

The ability to locate carrion of all sizes (roadkilled rattlesnake, squashed shrew, festering fish, demolished deer) and its superb thermal- and wind-riding give the turkey vulture a vast and diverse range: from Southern Canada down to Tierra del Fuego. While many turkey vultures of Eastern North America simply winter in the U.S. Southeast, our western vultures are long-distance migrants often heading for Central or South America.

Just as the first arriving vultures of March help inaugurate spring for me, the spiraling flocks (or "kettles") that mass before southbound migration draw summer to a close. Last year, the departing vulture kettle above Cove rose up in late September exactly a year and a day after I saw them head out in 2017.

While it's summering with us, admire the turkey vulture's grace on the wing — and give thanks for the important sanitation services of this patient undertaker of the fields, rangelands, and roadways.

Washington could boost nonlethal control of wolves

SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — The state of Washington could spend nearly $1 million over the next two years on nonlethal ways to prevent wolves from killing livestock in the northeastern corner of the state.

The Spokesman-Review says the bill has already passed the state House, and received approval from a key Senate committee Tuesday.

It would direct the Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop different management plans for wolves in different regions of the state, with more support in areas where they are rapidly multiplying.

Republican Rep. Joel Kretz says Northeast Washington has about 90 percent of the wolves. The bill would require the agency to increase staff in Stevens and Ferry counties and seek to deter wolves from preying on livestock without killing the wolves.