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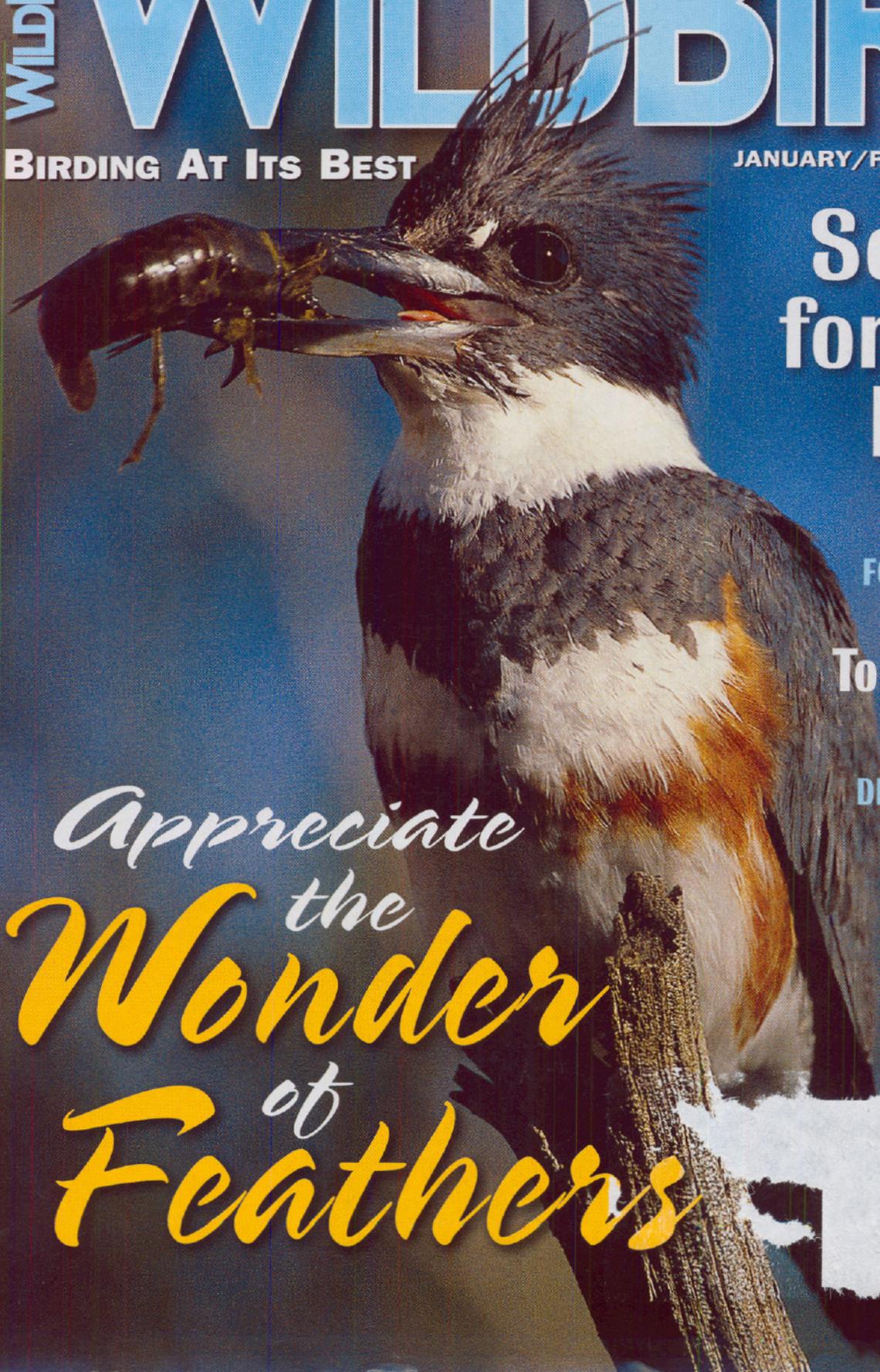
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I Never Met a Vulture I Didn't Like

by Noah Strycker

A joke currently making the rounds goes like this: Two vultures board an airplane, each carrying two dead raccoons. The stewardess looks at them and says, "Sorry, gentlemen, only one carrion allowed per passenger."

Let's face it: Putrefied flesh is no laughing matter—not if you have driven for miles with a reeking former raccoon in the trunk, your head hanging out the window, gagging on the smell. And I have.

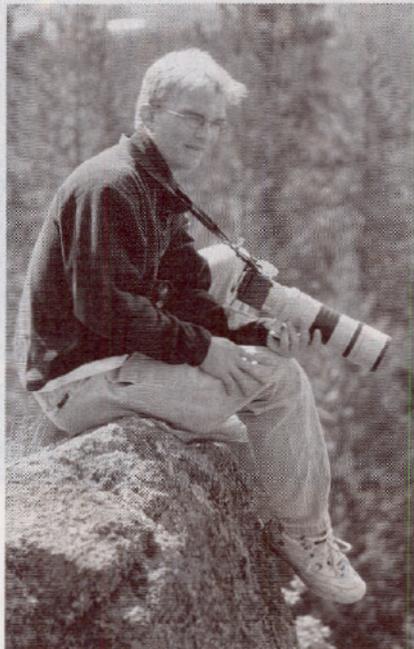
I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start with a personal introduction. I am *WildBird's* newest and youngest columnist. All you need to know about me is that nothing—neither snow nor rain nor mud nor mosquitoes nor gale force winds—will keep me from birding. I've lived all of my 18 years on 20 acres of rural Oregon forest, the past 10 years observing, photographing, drawing, painting and writing about birds at home and abroad, like a maniac. In this column, you'll get a taste of the fun I'm having.

You might say that snagging the perfect vulture image is my holy grail of bird photography. Getting that shot would be like winning the lottery. Because the average Turkey Vulture can smell decaying meat more than a mile away, my plan consisted of finding a dead animal, carting it home, hurling it into the back yard, and waiting for the vultures.

Unfortunately, once I started scouring the highways, the roadkill vanished. Where did all the flattened opossums and deer? Finally, on an August day, I spotted a raccoon carcass on the pavement and packed it home in the trunk. During the afternoon in a makeshift blind near the raccoon, the light was perfect. The carcass was as photogenic as it gets. The overpowering odor assaulted my nostrils. Hours passed.

Unfortunately, not a single vulture checked out my setup. After two days, the maggots finished off the raccoon. A

complete bust. Amazingly, the next day I lucked into a fresh dead deer on our property and set up the blind. This time, the vultures arrived, 15 of them! They plucked out the eyeballs and picked at the gums. They really went at it. I spent hours in the blind, excitedly taking pictures.



COURTESY OF BOB KEEFER

Unfortunately, I hadn't trampled the long grass around the deer. The photos revealed grassy shots with vulture heads sticking out. The birds moved on to better pickings, and I was left to contemplate what might have been.

This experience solidified the Turkey Vulture as my favorite bird and inspired me as a birder and bird photographer. I wanted to learn more about these enigmatic birds. Although commonly encountered in Oregon, little is known of their habits. Since they tend to breed in remote cliffs, rotted trees and holes, few nests have been located. I was intrigued that the species' main defense at the nest site is to defecate on offending predators. My next mission was clear: Find a vulture nest.

In midwinter, I hiked a nearby butte to check out birds in the jumble of poison oak and boulders at the top. A small cave slathered in whitewash contained a few black feathers. The stink hit me like a fist: eau de *Cathartes aura*.

I had to wait months for the vultures to migrate to Oregon. One sunny spring morning, I climbed the butte, poked my head into the cave and was nearly as startled as the adult Turkey Vulture sitting two feet from my face! When it moved a little, I saw two large, speckled eggs.

That spring and summer, I watched and photographed as one egg mysteriously disappeared and the other egg hatched, grew into a fluffy white chick and presumably fledged. The vultures charged and spat but never defecated on me.

My travels revealed many other vultures, including Black Vultures in Alabama eating a snake, and Black and Turkey Vultures in Mexico looking scenic on the sandy beaches. In Panama, I spied a pair of black-and-white King Vultures, positively regal with yellow and orange heads. For all-around vulturine greatness, though, I don't think you can beat the Turkey Vulture. Each year, after the long winter, when the air warms and the first flowers bloom, I start gazing skyward for that first Turkey Vulture of spring.

And One More Thing

I'm not a bird snob. My favorite bird is the Turkey Vulture, for pete's sake, but I like to reserve my life bird landmarks for cool birds. My 400th life bird was a Northern Spotted Owl, and my 900th life bird was a Red-headed Barbet. I was bummed when the American Ornithological Union recently split Canada Goose into two species—Cackling Goose and Canada Goose—making my 350th state bird a (yawn) Canada Goose. Got a birding peeve? Send an e-mail to me at birdboy@bkpix.com.