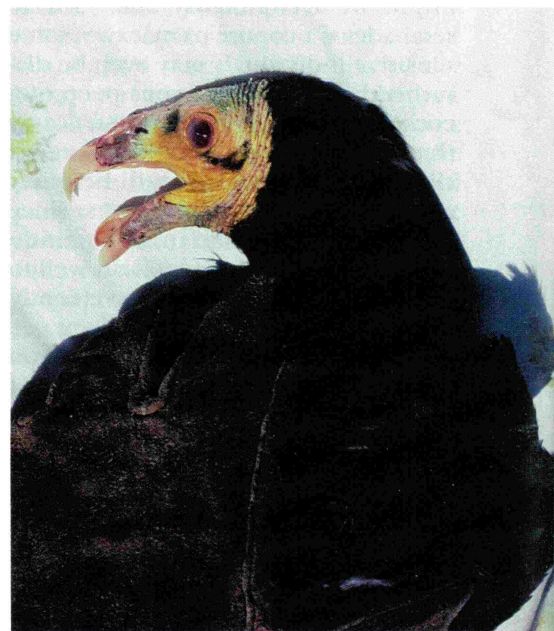




*Barely visible in the reeds,
a lesser yellow-headed
vulture searches for food.*



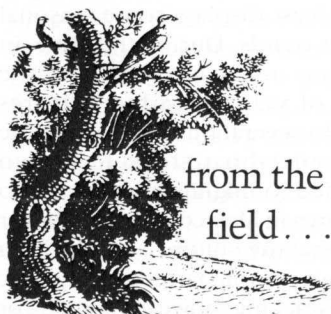
*The red iris and yellow head
distinguished the species from
its closest relative, the turkey vulture.*



*After hours of waiting followed by
minutes of frantic data collection
our first specimen was ready for release
by the author.*



*Prior to releasing the bird, a plastic
marker was attached so that its
movements could be monitored.*



Yellow-headed Vultures

by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear
Chairman, Conservation Committee
San Antonio, Texas

It was one of those hot summer days that are best spent under a cashew tree with a cold beer. Such thoughts frequently passed through my mind as I turned the bend to Crooked Tree Lagoon in northern Belize, Central America. Several days earlier I had left my coworkers, Steve McGehee and Will Waddell, at the lagoon in hopes of capturing specimens of the little known lesser yellowheaded vulture (*Cathartes burrovianus*). The objective of our study was to record data about the bird's ecological requirements as well as attempt to capture individuals so that measurements/weights could be taken. Should we be successful in capturing specimens an orange numbered tag would be attached to the bird's wing so that its movements could be monitored. After traversing the bridge that connects the mainland to the semi-island village of Crooked Tree, I had a glimpse of my coworkers as they walked down the lagoon's shoreline. Sunburned and dehydrated, they had a few choice words about the joys of field research. Seems that they observed only a few vultures. None of them were interested in the free meal provided inside the fish-net covered trap. "Let's have a cold drink and think of an alternate strategy,"

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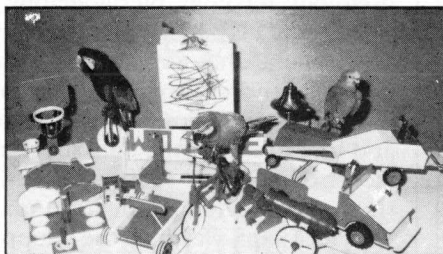
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I exclaimed. Off we headed, in my mud covered dusty Jeep to the village store to cool off the experience with a cold drink.

The lesser yellowheaded vulture is one of seven members of the vulture/condor family referred to as Cathartidae. The name was derived from the Greek word kathartes meaning a cleanser, a purifier. The family is composed of the two condors, the California and Andean, the magnificent king vulture, the black vulture, turkey vulture and two species of little known yellowheaded vultures. The lesser yellowheaded vulture inhabits savannas and marshy areas from southern Mexico to northern Argentina. In northern South America another species, the greater yellowheaded vulture (*Cathartes melambrotus*) also occurs. It appears to inhabit more forested areas than its smaller relative the lesser yellowheaded vulture. Feeding upon snails, turtles, fish and other aquatic life the yellowheaded vulture is frequently found in association with egrets, herons and the endangered jabiru stork. Such behaviors certainly support the current thought that the New World (Cathartid) vultures are more closely related to the storks than to the true birds of prey.

When scientists considered the osseology, myology, pterylography, vestigial wing claws, laryngeal apparatus and visceral anatomy of the Cathartid vultures and compared them to the same characteristics in both the storks and hawks/eagles, the data suggested a closer relationship to the storks. While the proposed reclassification may be hard to accept, watching the "hopping" courting dance of vultures and the feeding habits of the yellowheaded vulture in the marshes for aquatic life does make one question their relationship with the awesome eagles and hawks.

While ornithologists have observed adult yellowheads with downy headed young it is only from the data collected from early egg collectors that we have the eggs' description. The most noteworthy of such was a set of eggs discovered by G.D. Smooker in the Caroni Marsh of Trinidad in 1932. Hidden by a tangle of vines the eggs were described as being blotched with red-brown on a ground of cream, and have underlying marks of lavender. Their measurements were 70.25x48.75 and 69.5x49.5 mm. (From Blecher, Sir Charles, and G.D. Smooker. 1934-37. On the birds of the colony of Trinidad and Tobago. Part. 1 Ibis 4:572-595.) With the exception of the egg's description and the coloration of the newly fledged young, the repro-

ductive cycle has not yet been documented.

Like its wide ranging relative the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*), the lesser yellowheaded vulture is migratory or at least displays some seasonal movement trends. During this time, in the marshes of Tabasco, Mexico, the numbers of yellowheaded vultures increases to several hundred. Since the endangered jabiru stork has been documented to migrate from Belize to the same area in Mexico it would appear plausible that the vulture is displaying a similar movement pattern. Scientific evidence is lacking, however, proving or disproving this theory. This brings us back to Crooked Tree...

After drinking a couple of sodas, and not really quenching our thirsts, we drove down the receding shoreline to where our trap was set. Since the birds were reluctant to enter the trap our new plan called for the placement of some of the smaller fish at intervals of three feet or so in front of the trap. In this manner birds could feed without being close to the trap. As their tolerance for the object increased they would be forced to walk closer and closer to the trap. It was certainly worth the effort, so the trap was baited with the choicest fish and the smaller leftovers were placed in front of the trap spaced out by a couple of feet each.

Then the fun began. We pulled our vehicle into the thorny brush that lined the forest edge and waited. Hours passed. Finally a flock of five vultures landed. In the dominance hierarchy of vulture species the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) reigns above the turkey vulture. The turkey then displaces the yellowheaded vulture. Since our study site contained good populations of all three species the only hope we would have of capturing just lesser yellowheaded vultures would be if we could isolate a food item that they preferred but that the other species passed over. After a bit of experimentation small fish seemed to be the answer.

As the flock approached the trap their yellow and orange heads and necks attracted our attention. As the birds twisted their necks the sun's rays reflected off their heads allowing the prominent blue markings with green that covered their crowns to glow with iridescence. While the species is frequently misidentified as a turkey vulture when in flight, on land and in good light the differences between it and its redheaded cousin become obvious. Soon a bird was in the trap doorway, then inside. The decision to pull the

nylon line which closed the door was almost instinctive. Will knew that the timing had to be exact, else the bird, if caught in the doorway, would escape.

At the same instant that the door dropped all three of us burst out of the vehicle and began running toward the trap. The sooner we arrived and removed the bird the better, as it could not only physically harm itself but could go into shock as other vultures often do when under such stress. Early on in our planning we had replaced the wire mesh on the trap with fishnetting. Since the wire often promoted flesh wounds as the birds struggled to escape, the netting was less abrasive. Soon we realized that our choice was a good one as the bird had only a small scratch on the cere. Despite the intense heat and the gusting winds coming off the lagoon the bird was removed, measured, and weighed without incident. Finally an orange tag with the number one was attached to the right wing. The bird was then released.

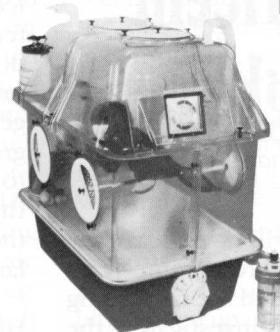
Although it was only one bird it marked the end of a long progression of events that started with grant writing and trap design experimentation. All aspects of the effort were tested with two captive turkey vultures prior to leaving the United States. The data forms were sent to several of the curators at major US museums for comments. While the possibility of resighting a marked bird is rather remote, the marking effort will give us important information as to whether the same birds stay at the lagoon throughout the year and if they return to the area year after year. Who knows, perhaps someday a yellowheaded vulture with the number one will be seen in the ricefields of Tabasco or in the marshes of Venezuela, where another researcher is also studying their ecology. In the meantime plans have been made to capture and mark additional birds so that the statistical odds of resighting one is increased.

Acknowledgements

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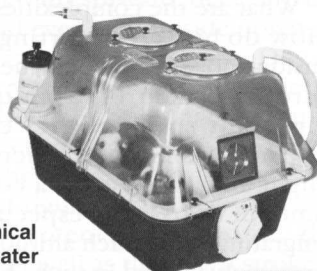
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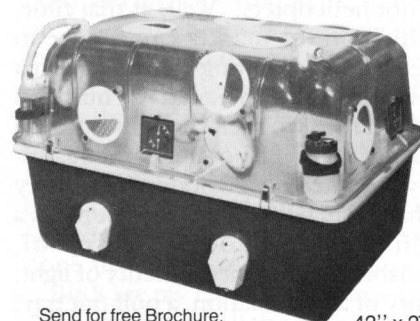
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