

Vultures have flown under radar

Population boom inspires scientists to study birds

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They bump shuttles at liftoff and live to squawk about it. They gnaw caulking off courthouses, and tear up pool covers and boat seats. Their acidic feces corrode telephone towers. Worst of all, they vomit when spooked and defecate on themselves to cool down from the summer heat. Buzzards may lack etiquette, but not guts or numbers. In recent years, they've been feasting on the increasing amount of road kill and refuse from Florida's booming growth. Scientists know very little about them, other than that their population is exploding nationwide.

So as buzzards begin their yearly trek to Florida in coming weeks, federal researchers are tagging them to find out where they go and why. They hope to develop better ways of dealing with vulture shenanigans. "There's a lot of things we don't know," said Michael Avery, a project leader with USDA's National Wildlife Research Center in Gainesville. "How long they live, when they first start to breed, what the age structure is." USDA researchers are fitting 16 vultures with satellite transmitters this month to document movements and behavioural patterns of vultures near the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, S.C. The project will develop better vulture management plans to increase air traffic safety at airports. No one really knows how many vultures live in the United States. From 1990 to

2002, Christmas bird counts showed annual increases nationwide of nearly two percent for Turkey Vultures and six percent for Black Vultures. That puts Black Vultures on pace to double their numbers in 12 years and Turkey Vultures to do the same in 36 years. A one-day snap shot of Brevard's bird population, Audubon's 2006 Christmas Bird Count, found 1138 Turkey Vultures and 1315 Black Vultures within three roughly 15-mile-wide circular areas in Merritt Island, Cocoa and south Brevard.

In September and October, migratory vultures will once again return, gracing places like the Miami Courthouse and increasing the resident legions that ransack Brevard's main landfill west of Cocoa. They can cause massive damage to aircraft wings, engines and windows. And Florida's ample landfills and road kill attract more of them, causing more in-flight collisions than in other states. There have been 13 vulture collisions with planes in Florida this year, compared with 27 last year and 19 in 2004, according to a Federal Aviation Administration database. Florida typically has on average 16 collisions between planes and vultures annually. Since 1990, 272 have been struck by planes. In August 2005, a mid-air collision between a Turkey Vulture and a twin-engine Cessna carrying two Brevard County commissioners and the county sheriff ripped the plane's wing

and punctured the fuel tank. The plane leaked fuel and was forced to make an emergency landing at Merritt Island Airport.

"You're always constantly vigilant of any kind of birds in the air," said Ryan Knight of Melbourne, who flies a Cessna 152 out of Merritt Island Airport. "You never know, all the way up to 10,000 feet. They can be absolutely anywhere."

NASA's been struggling with buzzards for years. In July of 2005, the tip of the external fuel tank of shuttle Discovery smashed into at least one Turkey Vulture. The strike caused no significant damage but triggered stepped-up patrols to pick up road kill at the Kennedy Space Center. That tip came from a consultation with Disney officials. "By taking the road kill out of the main roads, we have, we believe, reduced the number of vultures," said Steve Payne, NASA's test director. The space center shoots a shotgun-like device to scare buzzards from launch pads and landing strips, with mixed success. Past attempts to trap them or "stink" them away with chemical odours failed. "They find very little offensive. We've tried everything," Payne said, adding that buzzards sometimes nest atop the shuttle fuel tanks. "We have had scratches on our tanks, where hawks and vultures will roost on top of it and leave scratch marks," he said. In coming shuttle launches, they'll try a new, 18-foot

tall cannon NASA bought that can blast a focused sound wave to scare birds from up to a few thousand feet away. NASA also bought new radar to scan for birds near launch pads and is considering using trained falcons to scare off the vultures, Payne said.

Buzzards have long been the bane of those who maintain telephone, water supply and Doppler radar towers. In downtown Melbourne, workers hang a dead, stuffed vulture upside-down from the 300-foot-tall BellSouth tower on Palmetto Avenue. It hangs as an example, to let other buzzards know they're not welcome. Vultures that roost on the tower peck at equipment and leave behind a rank, corrosive mess. The birds routinely dropped road kill into BellSouth's air-conditioning unit underneath the tower. Over the years, the company tried balloons, fake owls and even an electronic device that emits screeching bird sounds. None worked.

Buzzards aren't all bad, scientists say. They defend the lowly creature as a key ecological scavenger that harnesses potential medical breakthroughs. Knowledge about how the bird's gut allows them to eat rot without getting sick could help prevent or cure human disease, they say. "They have a highly acidic digestive tract from what we know," Avery said. "They're very adaptable."

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