



Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird

Katie Fallon

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Turkey vultures, the most widely distributed and abundant scavenging birds of prey on the planet, are found from central Canada to the southern tip of Argentina, and nearly everywhere in between. In the United States we sometimes call them buzzards; in parts of Mexico the name is aura cabecirroja, in Uruguay jote cabeza colorada, and in Ecuador gallinazo aura. A huge bird, the turkey vulture is a familiar sight from culture to culture, in both hemispheres. But despite being ubiquitous and recognizable, the turkey vulture has never had a book of literary nonfiction devoted to it—until *Vulture*. Floating on six-foot wings, turkey vultures use their keen senses of smell and sight to locate carrion. Unlike their cousin the black vulture, turkey vultures do not kill weak or dying animals; instead, they cleanse, purify, and renew the environment by clearing it of decaying carcasses, thus slowing the spread of such dangerous pathogens as anthrax, rabies, and botulism. The beauty, grace, and important role of these birds in the ecosystem notwithstanding, turkey vultures are maligned and underappreciated; they have been accused of spreading disease and killing livestock, neither of which has ever been substantiated. Although turkey vultures are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which makes harming them a federal offense, the birds still face persecution. They've been killed because of their looks, their odor, and their presence in proximity to humans. Even the federal government occasionally sanctions “roost dispersals,” which involve the harassment and sometimes the murder of communally roosting vultures during the cold winter months. *Vulture* follows a year in the life of a typical North American turkey vulture. By incorporating information from scientific papers and articles, as well as interviews with world-renowned raptor and vulture experts, author Katie Fallon examines all aspects of the bird's natural history: breeding, incubating eggs, raising chicks, migrating, and roosting. After reading this book you will never look at a vulture in the same way again.

Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird Details

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Alison says

"May your roosts be warm, your thermals strong, and your carrion only slightly spoiled."

I loved this book! I saw Katie Fallon give a talk almost 2 years ago, with Borris the Turkey Vulture, and I can't believe it took me this long to read her book. She is an engaging speaker and talented writer whose passion for vultures is contagious. Katie understands the connection between humans and vultures from an ecological perspective, but also from a deeply spiritual perspective which she conveys beautifully in this balanced mix of personal stories, scientific information, and cultural lore. Bird nerds and scavenger-appreciators everywhere will enjoy this book, but I also hope her message reaches another audience- hunters who could make a simple change in their hunting practices to save the lives of raptors!

Nari says

I have learned a lot about vultures, cultures and history from the perspective of carrion eating birds through this amazing book. Vulture gives a great coverage to not just vultures but lot of interconnected cultural aspects ranging from prehistoric events to more recent happenings, including a good coverage of times during the Gettysburg battle of the American civil war. Old-time Egypt, pre-historic north america, India, South America all feature prominent stories of their own so this is a book with a global reach, like the birds themselves that migrate thousands of miles.

I bought this way back in mid-2017 when I met the author at a bird rescue and education event. However, since then I also ended up getting Cerulean blues - also by the same author but written earlier, so I stopped this book and switched over to Cerulean blues to keep chronological consistency. It was a good decision, as these books both also dip into changes happening in the personal life of the author and it is a privilege to walk alongside and hear the story. Having finished Cerulean blues in Dec, I then picked up this book again earlier this summer and read at a regular pace to enjoy every little story and detail! I am also very lucky to be volunteering at the ACCA - a non-profit for bird rescue, rehabilitation and research, founded and run by the author.

Sara says

Read this book, and you will look at vultures with both a new respect and more empathy. Katie Fallon writes an intimate portrait of a bird that is critical to our ecosystem yet often maligned and mistreated -- and even feared. I had started noticing vultures more even before I read this book. They are big; they are dramatic. They are so often easy to spot in the skies where I live.

But this book opened my eyes to the importance of vultures and also the risk that they face from cars, poison,

lead bullets, and many other threats. We need vultures, and by taking a few simple steps, we could help ensure that they continue to cleanse our environment and protect us from disease.

But this book isn't just about vultures. It also is an intimate memoir that details Fallon's own exploration into the world of these birds and her connections to the vultures she has rescued, befriended, and loved.

Steven says

Computer crashed, so now I'm kind of angry. Not taking it out on this book, but my pithy review will now be short and sweet.

Fallon clearly adores turkey vultures and her enthusiasm is infectious. To be sure, turkey vultures do a lot to try and keep us away so they can get about the business of consuming dead things. They are often found neck-deep in gore, poop on their own legs to keep cool and kill bacteria (urohidrosis), hiss rather than call or sing, and projectile vomit when threatened. Nice. Just as well, though, because what they do is immensely important to the health of their environments.

Two things I found interesting from this book. One is that Old World and New World vultures are examples of convergent evolution. Though they look quite similar, Old World vultures are more closely related to raptors like hawks and eagles, while New World vultures are more closely related to storks. The other is that while still abundant in the Americas, the greatest threat to vultures is lead poisoning via the ammunition used to kill the deer and other game on whose gut piles they feed. Simply using steel or copper ammunition would solve the problem, but the gun lobby sees any suggestion of changing their way of doing things as a threat. Grrrr...

A great book on these weird and fascinating creatures, with great resource listings in the back, including a list of vulture-related festivals around the United States.

Kest Schwartzman says

This isn't so much a book as it is a loose conglomeration of marginally organized facebook rants. I got it as part of librarything's early review program- if I had just picked it up, I woulda given up during the part where the author, who has no understanding of archeology, tried to justify a theory that human culture wouldn't exist were it not for vultures. As is, I pushed through that, and it DID get slightly better, but then things would go downhill for long segments.

I picked the book up because I LIKE vultures, and I wanted to learn something about them. I did learn a few things, but mostly I got scolded for not liking vultures. There's a lot of scolding in here.

There's a long scene in which the author is driving along a road next to a windfarm, and she sets her cruise control so that she can give all her attention to watching raptors not get hit by turbine blades. She describes herself shrieking aloud in her empty car when there are near misses. She does not describe the near misses that no doubt occurred between her car and various woodchucks/squirrels/etc, because she didn't notice those- she was busy watching the vultures. She also doesn't bother mentioning the statistics for how many vultures are hit by cars while dining on roadkill.

That passage stuck in my mind most, but there's a lot of that sort of thing- very focused rants that last far too long and which are clearly responses to -something- but the something wasn't printed in the book.

The strongest parts of the book are when she introducing various scientists and their work- these people are enthusiastic, our author is enthusiastic, and while we are being told about the science, we get to actually learn things about the vultures that this book purports to be about.

Tonstant Weader says

Vultures are fascinating birds who are poorly understood by most of us. Katie Fallon, cofounder of the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, hopes to rectify that with her book, *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird*.

One of the first things a reader learns is something that should be obvious, but isn't. Vultures are a critical element in the food chain, but in a way, they are also outside it. They are neither predator and are seldom prey. They, by and large, only eat carrion, the remains of already dead animals, so there is no predation in their consumption. They are not natural prey of animals in the wild and are only prey to humans because we are wildly misinformed.

In a grotesque example, the Washington Post published a story headlined “Virginia Vultures Turn Vicious, Dine on Pets, Terrorize Owners.” It included the false anecdote of a vulture carrying off a neighbor’s pet, except it would be impossible for a vulture to carry an animal in its talons. More importantly, they are not interested in live prey. They are sometimes implicated in the deaths of pets and livestock because they clean up the aftermath, which is kind of like blaming the hotel maid for the damage the partiers did the night before.

Vultures are important to human survival as they clean up the dead, preventing the spread of disease. In India and Africa, vulture populations are threatened and with reduced numbers have come increased problems. In Africa, they are deliberately targeted by poachers as vultures reveal the site of mass poaching kills.

Katie Fallon is more than a vulture enthusiast; she is a vulture evangelist and her book, *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird* is a work of bird evangelism. In many ways, that makes it an exciting book. It does, however, cause her to come across a bit unbalanced a couple of times. For example, when communities in their fear and ignorance ask the USDA to “do something” about the vultures roosting in town, one of the USDA tactics is to place effigies and dead vulture carcasses. This drives them away without shooting them because they don’t eat their own. Perhaps there is some instinct that suggests dead vulture carcasses indicate a danger. So it works and the townsfolk don’t end up organizing an illegal buzzard shoot.

Vultures roost as an extended family, so she analogizes a vulture coming to see those effigies to a person coming home and seeing an uncle hanging from the porch. Now I will quote her exactly, because this is too problematic to paraphrase, “But killing and hanging carcasses in trees—with the intent to intimidate and disperse certain populations—also has troubling historical complications, especially in the South. It seems, at least to me, that this practice should never be normalized, for any species.” Did she just compare a method to disperse vultures without killing them to lynching? A species protection tactic to terrorism? This is an anthropomorphic stretch and it’s an analogy that should never have been made. The list of things that can be compared to lynching is short and contains one item: lynching.

One of my favorite parts of the book were the short interstitial narratives that describe the life of a female vulture over the course of a year. They are poetic, but restrained for the most part to description. There is no projection of human emotion onto the vulture, just a narrative of what she sees and does. I was fascinated by

the information about the vultures. I mean, wow! a vulture flew at 37,000 feet! It's sad we know this because it was sucked into an engine, but that's amazing.

Turkey buzzards, her favorite vulture, are particularly interesting because their population is thriving despite the challenges human activity throw in their way. This is in sharp contrast to vultures in other parts of the world. This is also in spite of the grotesque insistence on lead ammunition by hunters as it kills wildlife who consume the remains of dressed deer and other game. Hunters would be a boon to vultures if they only changed their ammunition. In a disgraceful example of seeking the bottom rung of humanity, the Trump Administration has repealed the ban on lead ammunition. This means more birds and other animals dying of lead poisoning.

Fallon does not just present the problems. Her final chapter gives a list of actions people who care about birds and who care about vultures can take to make a difference. This makes her an evangelist, but that is what birds need.

I was provided a copy of *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird* for review by the publisher through a drawing at LibraryThing.

★★★

[http://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpress...](http://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpress.com)

Janet Eshenroder says

You may think you don't like vultures but this book will have you looking at them with affection and respect. The author does an excellent job dispelling myths, letting us inside the lives of vultures and vulture rescue teams.

I heard the author speak (yes, she brought Lew the vulture with her) and found it fascinating and entertaining. Her book goes in more depth and left me worried about the future of these birds who are so critical to the ecosystem.

I will never again look at the sky, hoping for a hawk or eagle, only to say, "Oh, it's JUST a turkey vulture."

Jimmy says

When I see vultures, I am always amazed at the power of evolution. When there is a food source, in this case dead animals, some living creature will evolve enough to be able to eat it. Without reading the book, my understanding has always been that the birds evolved by acquiring more stomach acid to deal with the rotting meat.

"A turkey vulture is neither prey nor predator. It exists outside the typical food chain, beyond the kill-or-be-killed law of nature, although without death it would starve. . . . The vulture transforms . . . deaths into life. It wastes nothing. It does not kill. It is not a murderer, and it is not often murdered."

The Cherokee called them "peace eagles." Their Latin name, *Cathartes aura*, means "breezy cleanser." It is the world's most widely distributed scavenger bird. It is equally visible to everyone. Toxic lead pellets are a

common source of dead vultures. (Can't we get the lead out, folks?)

Why the negative impression? Their naked heads? Their diet? Their reminder of impending death? The fact that they vomit at you when threatened?

The most heroic of all vultures appears in the Hindu *Ramayana*. Very few examples like that in pop culture, including children's cartoons.

Efforts to ban lead shot run into difficulties. Here in NH we try to couch it around saving loons. We need to pick an iconic animal to get people to take action. The National Rifle Association and other gun groups claim it is a slippery slope. Ban lead shot and the next thing you know FBI agents will take away your guns. The NRA does more damage in this country than just about any other group I know. If you live in another country, don't let them get a foothold.

California condors are cousins of the vulture. In 1987, it was officially extinct in the wild when the last 22 individuals were captured. An intensive captive-breeding program was launched. Now more than 400 are alive in the wild. More than 5 million dollars is spent annually to keep them alive.

We would have more species of vulture in North America if more of our megafauna had survived. Those birds needed big dead bodies to eat.

Condors need carcasses to survive. Hunters help them to survive by leaving offal on the ground. However, the lead shot was also a problem. Unfortunately, scientific evidence does not always convince people of a need.

The author describes a ranger discussing lead shot. A man argues with the ranger. "Birds eat lead paint too" he says. The he walks out. It is necessary to change that man's mind, but how? The NRA is not helping.

I received this book free from the Goodreads giveaway program, and I enjoyed it immensely.

Becky Churchman says

When Fallon sticks to the science, this is pretty interesting. What killed it for me was the author constantly discussing her personal life (how pregnant she was at the time) amidst the facts. It's nice that she loves these animals, and her passion is appreciated; but I couldn't care less about the thoughts about her baby while she's watching a vulture mother. She also continually anthropomorphised these animals and then brought attention to the fact that she was doing it. Annoying. If you can wade through all the personal "stuff," this book does offer great information and will give you appreciation for these birds.

Christina says

I have always been fascinated by Vultures and have spent quite a bit of time mesmerized watching them fly - so majestic in the sky. I never took the time, however, to learn about them though, so when this book came across my radar I immediately snatched it up.

I not only devoured and enjoyed every page of this book - including the reference "what you can do" section

at the end, I gained an even greater appreciation and respect for this bird. The author has a passion for birds in general, but specifically vultures, which comes across in the writing and content. If you are a bird lover, pick this up! If you are a nature lover, pick this up! And, by all means, if you are a Vulture lover this is a must read!

Not only has this book made it to my favorite reads of the year (by the way, it is rare that non fiction in general makes it to that list for me), but I am now inspired to learn even more about Vultures and other birds in general.

Five star read!

Jim Minick says

A mix of a fascinating natural history of a wrongly maligned bird along with a personal memoir.

Tippy Jackson says

Ok, I had a very love/hate relationship with this book. But at the end of the day, I love vultures and there was a lot of fascinating vulture info in this book and a few other good tidbits too. Vulture info from different cultures and throughout history. Info on vulture festivals and different vulture species and vultures in art. I mean it's beautiful. Oh! And giant prehistoric vultures that had 25 foot wingspans!

There was also a great story about a place called Meadowcroft Rockshelter. In this location one can find the perfect campsite. Humans throughout history seem to have agreed on this. At first, at a quick glance you could find evidence of a modern campfire. Beer cans. Syringes. Fire pit. But as archaeologists excavated, they uncovered older and older fire pits. The lowest campfire pit was 16,000 years old! Prior to this, we only had evidence of humans in North America from no more than 12,000 years ago.

The only negative is the writing sometimes. When the author is talking science she is on point. But when she starts anthropomorphizing it's almost unbearable. And it's repetitive. She narrates what she thinks the birds are thinking while she's working on them. And there's some exaggeration when it comes to the importance of vultures for certain things. And she extrapolates a lot. Here's a great example. She's in India. At a temple that has previously had vultures considered sacred. But the vultures are gone. In this region, research has shown that a drug used to treat cows may be the culprit. So, as she's sitting cross-legged, breathing deeply and feeling at peace in what must be a holy place (all her words), she looks up and is reminded of the absence of the sacred vultures. Then she says "...can a pharmaceutical company destroy even holy creatures? Had science finally killed God? The priests may have been correct in their belief that the vultures' disappearance presaged troubled times to come; in recent years India has had its share of tragedy, notably the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Mumbai attacks." I suppose... props for being open minded? I dunno. I suppose there's nothing here claiming that this is a scientific book, but she does include a fair amount of research and talks about the value of peer reviewed science. Like a lot. So it seems crazy silly to me that she would also talk about vultures being omens for bad things because of a very loose correlation between bad things happening in India and the birds being poisoned. I mean really?

Anyway, periodically there'd be things like this, but most of the book is about vultures and it is wonderful.

PS-Here's a list of vulture festivals:

1. Return of the Buzzards (Hinckley, Ohio)
2. Welcome Back, Buzzards and Bye Bye, Buzzards (Superior, Arizona)
3. East Coast Vulture Festival (New Jersey)
4. Coralville Lake Turkey Vulture Festival (Iowa)
5. Vulture Fest (Makanda, Illinois)
6. Kern Valley Autumn Nature and Vulture Festival (Weldon, California)

Lacy says

There was good information in this book about vultures. The author helpfully throws in biological facts, natural history, some mythology, wildlife rehabilitation, vulture culture ... some really good, useful, and fun information. I didn't mind the tone of these sections - she was conversational and interesting to read.

If she did lose me through this book, it was for one of two reasons: either she was going into an odd amount of personal detail - her husband's current hair situation, how she was wearing her hair, how pregnant she was, a Turkey Vulture's heartbeat beating alongside that of her unborn child, etc. - or she was anthropomorphizing to an inappropriate degree, at least it seemed inappropriate from my point of view.

Since the personal detail and anthropomorphization were both scattered throughout the book, I carried some annoyance with me through reading this. However, it did have good information about some species that are, at best, vastly underappreciated in the modern age. This book is a toast to vultures and the value they bring to our natural world.

DMREAnne says

If you love Turkey Vultures, you will definitely want this book. If you are even mildly interested in vultures, or are interested in vultures or birds in general, you will want this book. Although Turkey Vultures are the star of this book, Black Vultures, and Old World Vultures also have their own chapters. As a full disclosure I must say that I came to this book already head over heels in love with vultures, especial Turkey Vultures. As a raptor handler for the Draper Museum Raptor Experience, Suli, our Turkey Vulture, is one of the birds I handle the most, and it didn't take me long to discover how much I adore the species. I originally debated whether to purchase this book, as I have done a lot of reading and research on vultures and was concerned that it would be too repetitive. I am so delighted that I made the decision to purchased the book. Katie Fallon's love for Turkey Vultures is expressed beautifully, and mirrors my own feelings about the TVs. If you have not yet fallen in love with these wonderful birds, it is likely that she will convince you that they are a worthy bird to love. Introducing each chapter with a short paragraph, written to resemble a Turkey Vulture's biography, is beautiful in some cases, and always a fun way to begin the chapter's topic. Beware that although many of the passages are heartwarming, others are very sad. The information contained within the book not only deals with interesting facts about these birds, but also the tragedy of what can happen to them. The book was so beautifully written, that it kept my attention from the beginning to the last page, including pages that covered facts that I am already very familiar with. And yes, if you are wondering, I also gained new knowledge. I highly recommend this book to anyone who loves birds, even if vultures are not a favorite. Reading this book, may give you a whole new perspective on a bird that so many people misunderstand.

RaecheL says

I've always really liked carrion birds. I think they're very interesting and are extremely beneficial to the environment, but have an undeserved bad reputation. In *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird* Katie Fallon looks at vultures, focusing mainly on black vultures and turkey vultures, and their environmental roles. She touches on various myths histories of these birds. Fallon also discusses her work helping to rehabilitate vultures and her efforts to educate people about them.

This book reminded me a lot of another book that looks at another history of an underappreciated scavenger, *Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History*. Both books take a detailed look at their respective subjects and help clarify misconceptions about their behavior.

This book is very easy to pick up and understand and I'd recommend it to anyone who wanted to learn more about these fascinating creatures.
