Wandering or Possible Range
Expansion of the Turkey Vulture in Puerto Rico

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The Turkey Vulture, Cathartes aura (Cathartidae), occurs commonly from Cabo Rojo to Ponce, Puerto Rico. Raffaele (1989) and Santana et al. (1986a, b) noted that this bird is occasionally reported from as far east as Salinas and Coamo Springs, but Perez Rivera and Cotte Santana (1977) found it further east to Guayama and Caguas, and inland to Maricao and Caguas. Rivera Cianchini and Mojica Sandoz (1981) found this bird in Naguabo and Humacao. All records outside of southwestern Puerto Rico were sightings of individual birds. These sporadic records should be incorporated in the next revision of Raffaele (1989).

We make frequent trips around the island to collect fishes (Bunkley-Williams and Williams, 1994, 1995), which provide opportunities to make casual bird observations. We had not seen the Turkey Vulture east of Ponce during these sporadic observations from 1974 through 1992. On 20 February 1993 at 1030 h, we observed a Turkey Vulture southwest of Cayey, Puerto Rico. At 1230 h, we observed another Turkey Vulture just north of Caguas, Puerto Rico. On 25 February 1993 at 1100 h, we observed a Turkey Vulture above the center of La Plata Reservoir SW of Bayamon, Puerto Rico.

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to Rico. The vulture was being harassed by an Osprey, Pandion haliaetus (Pandionidae). On 10 April 1993, at 1400 h, one Turkey Vulture was observed above El Toro in the Caribbean National Forest, soaring around near the top of the mountain (J. Schmidt-Gengenbach and J. Holmquist, pers. comm.). This bird was not included in a checklist of birds in the Caribbean National Forest (Wiley and Bauer, 1985) and has not been reported in this area previously.

Santana et al. (1986a, b) found that Turkey Vultures had increased little in numbers and range since original reports of this bird in Puerto Rico, and suggested that its restriction to the arid south coast was due to their dependence on cattle raised largely in these areas. This does not seem to be an entirely satisfactory explanation. Cattle are raised along the southeast coast of Puerto Rico, where Turkey Vultures do not occur. We have seen these birds attracted to fish kills and chicken production facilities. They appear to be opportunistic in acquiring carrion. Chicken production facilities; municipal garbage dumps; and feral dogs, cats and mongooses that are frequently killed on highways around the island, should support a few birds in areas away from the south central and southwest coasts.

Three of our records occurred further north than previous records for the Turkey Vulture in Puerto Rico. Three records were noted in a five day period.
and all four occurred in a little more than a month. This grouping in time and invasion of new areas may make these records more indicative of some change in the range of the Turkey Vulture than past, sporadic records of individual birds.

The peculiar distribution pattern of the Turkey Vulture in Puerto Rico requires more explanation. The previous, sporadic observations of these birds east of Ponce and our observations further northeast may be the wanderings of a few individuals (Rivera Cianchini and Mojica Sandoz, 1981), but they could represent a range expansion of this species. More observations are needed to confirm this alternate hypothesis.

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LITERATURE CITED


