Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

Unlike the Black Vulture with its small and locally distributed breeding population within Ohio, Turkey Vultures are fairly common to locally abundant summer residents throughout the state. Their widespread distribution is reflected by their presence in 693 priority blocks, representing 90.7% of the statewide total. They were least numerous in the Lake Plain physiographic region with records from 76.8% of that region's priority blocks. Urbanization in the Cleveland metropolitan area and intensive agricultural practices in the northwestern counties are responsible for their relative scarcity in this physiographic region. Turkey Vultures are most numerous within the Unglaciated Plateau region where they were recorded in more than 98.1% of the priority blocks. They were found in 89.3–91.4% of the blocks in the other physiographic regions.

The relative abundance of Turkey Vultures in Ohio is poorly represented in the Breeding Bird Survey data since these surveys are taken during the early morning hours before the vultures become conspicuous. They are actually most numerous along the entire unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, and least numerous within the most intensively farmed western and central counties and near large urban areas (Peterjohn 1989a).

Turkey Vultures do not readily fit into the Atlas Project's breeding criteria codes. Except for very small areas immediately adjacent to their nests, they do not exhibit territorial behavior (Coles 1944). Breeding adults wander as far as 8–12 miles from their nests in search of food (Coleman and Fraser 1989). Hence, observations of soaring vultures were categorized as possible breeders since their presence does not necessarily indicate nesting in the block. Their summer roosting behavior also provides few clues concerning the breeding status of vultures. Nesting vultures frequently roost in different locations each evening, while established roosts may be occupied by both breeders and nonbreeders. These roosts are not necessarily located close to nests (Coleman and Fraser 1989); hence roosting vultures were also categorized as possible breeders. Probable status was utilized in only a few cases where pairs were repeatedly observed at an inaccessable but otherwise suitable nest site. Confirmed status was only applied to active nests.

As shown on the accompanying map, Turkey Vultures were difficult to confirm as nests were only found in 23 priority blocks. Most observations were of soaring or roosting vultures as indicated by 665 records of possible breeders.

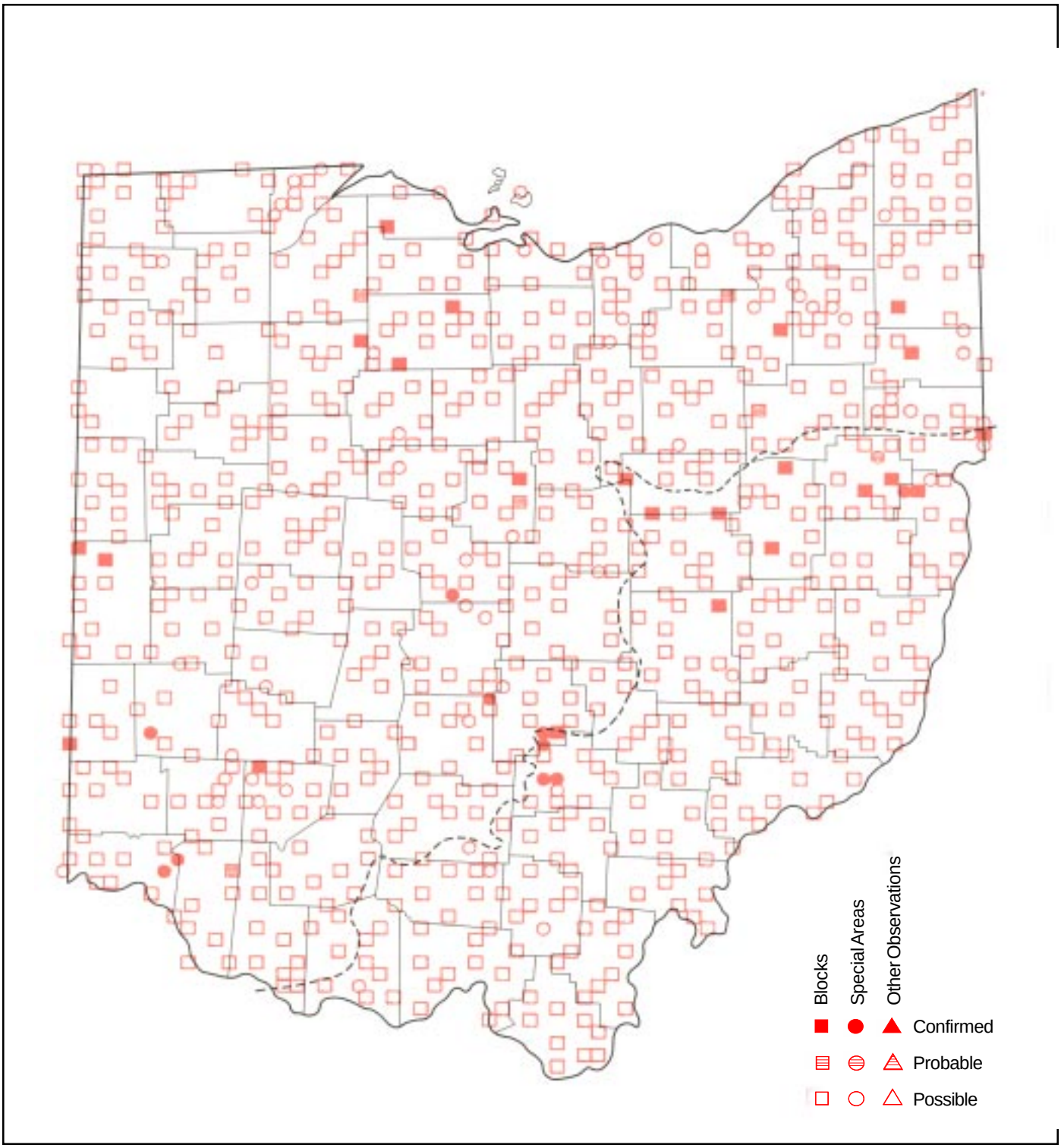
The statewide distribution of Turkey Vultures has not appreciably changed during this century. Hicks (1935) cited nesting records from 86 counties. Based on counts of roosting vultures at 114 locations in 81 counties, he estimated a statewide population of 3650 individuals. Since a number of vultures do not utilize these roosts, his statewide estimates were undoubtedly low. No similar estimates have been produced in subsequent decades. This population is probably not declining, since Turkey Vultures are spreading northward and increasing throughout most of the Great Lakes region (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986).

Within Ohio, the breeding biology and chronology of Turkey Vultures have been studied by Coles (1944) and Price (1934b). These studies plus information available in other sources indicate their nesting biology in the state is representative of that described elsewhere in their range (Palmer 1988).

Tim Daniel - Division of Wildlife

Most Turkey Vulture nests were discovered on the ground in hollow logs, hollow trees, and dense brushy thickets. These ground nests are invariably placed in undisturbed, extensive woodlands. Along the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, caves and rock ledges provide preferred nest sites (Coles 1944). Turkey Vultures will also utilize abandoned buildings and they have even nested in large tree cavities to heights of 60 feet (Maslowski 1934, Price 1928a). As was true for Black Vultures, the proportion of nests on the ground or in abandoned buildings has increased during recent decades, apparently reflecting a shortage of preferred nest sites in some areas (Palmer 1988).

The earliest published egg date in Ohio is April 8 (Coles 1944). Most clutches have been discovered between April 20 and May 25, although renesting attempts are responsible for clutches through June 13 (Buchanan 1980, Williams 1950). Young vultures normally hatch during May or the first week of June. They remain in the nest for approximately nine weeks (Palmer 1988). Fledged young have been reported as early as June 30 (Trautman 1940). However, most young Turkey Vultures probably fledge between July 15 and August 15.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	73	76.8	10.5	1.2
Till Plain	271	242	89.3	34.9	2.3
Ill. Till Plain	46	42	91.3	6.1	0.4
Glaciated Plateau	140	128	91.4	18.5	0.4
Unglaciated Plateau	212	208	98.1	30.0	0.8

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	**693**	**90.7%**
Confirmed	23	3.3%
Probable	5	1.0%
Possible	665	96.0%