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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Buzzards: Much Smarter Than We Knew

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Everything we thought we knew about buzzards came from Roy Rogers and Gene Autry comic books. The typical comic book scenario went something like this: An unfortunate cowboy somehow slipped from his trusty horse (Trigger or Champion), after which he happened to stumble into a patch of quicksand. Then in a nanosecond, a ravenous flock of buzzards gathered on top of a stand of ominous looking trees, surrounding the quicksand.

Somehow there were always several menacing trees right behind patches of quicksand. Go figure. The buzzards perched there patiently, waiting for the inevitable. They (and we) knew that the hapless cowboy would inevitably sink into the quicksand and die, following which they (the buzzards) would descend and eat the helpless cowboy. When the buzzards were done there would be no trace. No one would ever know what had happened to him. A terrible fate. Melodramatic music plays.

In the comic books (as well as in the movies) that inevitable fate was miraculously short-circuited by the relationship between the cowboy and his horse. Roy or Gene would whistle just as he had sunk to armpit depth. The shrill sound was the signal for Trigger or Champion to kneel carefully and use his teeth to pass a rope along to his master. Amazing! How did a horse know how to do this? But it never failed. And we never questioned the sequence. It just happened. Once Roy or Gene had secured himself with the proper knot, his horse would stand up and slowly pull him out of the quicksand to safety. The cowboy was saved, and the buzzards flew away to search for a different meal. Perhaps a dying coyote or antelope.

Each spring a similar scene repeated itself along Erie's bayfront wilderness. In late March, as the weather was warming and Bay Rats were returning to their traditional outdoor habitats, there was also a regular local buzzard visit. Our buzzards were turkey vultures, a close relative of the scary buzzards that had regularly harassed our cowboy heroes. They were the large migrating birds that still come to Erie each season in the spring. There was one other missing ingredient, however. Quicksand. We were sure that there was quicksand someplace along the bayfront, but we never actually located it.

Turkey vultures are most famous, regionally, for their annual arrival in Hinkley, Ohio, an event that is celebrated each year on March 24. During the early 1950s, locals in Hinkley took note of the predictable arrival of the buzzards (turkey vultures) and began to celebrate with an annual festival. Hinkley Buzzard Sunday has grown into an amazing event with food trucks, vendors, parades, fireworks, and other celebrations. Somehow buzzards have become Ohio celebrities.



Hinckley Poster



Buzzard Sunday has been celebrated each year in Hinckley, Ohio since 1957

The annual bayfront buzzard arrival made us imagine that we were treading on dangerous ground when we walked the paths along the bluffs. There was probably no quicksand but who knew what dangers could present themselves if we slowed down or stopped for too long? The buzzards were always there. Watching. Waiting. But we were brave. Years passed and I somehow decided that the buzzards (turkey vultures) were not really a threat. They were a regular spring and

summer presence and seemed ever present, soaring over beaches and roadways in a perpetual search for carrion.

One notable encounter took place when I was on the bay in my double kayak with my (at the time) very young grandson Noah. It was early morning, and we were paddling at the head of the bay taking pictures of the remains of a sunken fish tug. Noticing several turkey vultures swirling about above us, I suggested to Noah that we stop paddling and play dead. For about 10 minutes we put our paddles away and pretended to be unconscious. Almost on cue, the vultures began to come closer, and one of them actually landed on our kayak to have a look. Noah could barely contain himself. He burst into laughter, and when he did the bird took off and our fun was over. Until we went home and he “ratted his grampa out” by narrating the story of how we played dead until buzzards landed on us to “pick on our bones.” His grandmother was not pleased. Just one more of many examples of why I should not have been trusted to be in charge of impressionable grandchildren.

Fast forward several decades. About 20 years ago, we discovered a small condominium compound on the ocean off Charleston, South Carolina, where we have been living during the winter months. A few years after our arrival as we were hunting for fun things to do, we began to visit the South Carolina Center for Birds of Prey. Like many such bird recovery stations, it is a combination hospital and recovery station for injured or sick birds that helpful citizens find and take to the long-term bird shelter. The sheltered birds cannot be rehabilitated and released and are housed in cages that folks can visit. The first hope of the veterinarians and volunteers who work there is to return the bird patients that come to their center to the wild after treatment. The unfortunate birds whose injuries are so severe that they cannot be rehabilitated, however, may become center residents.

Regular resident birds are groomed into becoming stars of weekly public shows, where trainers demonstrate exciting flying maneuvers and other tricks based upon operant conditioning. The two-hour show features owls, eagles, a variety of hawks, and, of course, several turkey vultures. Like other operant conditioning-driven animal shows or dog training routines, the degree of intelligence of a creature is represented by the total number of connections that an animal (or bird) can recall between antecedents and desired behaviors. That, for example, is the criterion by which border collies have been judged to be the most intelligent dogs. On average they retain a larger number of antecedent-behavior connections than other dog breeds.

Bird species are judged the same way. Some retain more antecedent-behavior connections than others. As visitors watch each show, select birds perform tricks, ranging from flying back and forth across the large property to catching treats that are thrown into the air, and performing other “amazing routines.”

Being a “behavioral management nerd,” I eventually asked the essential question, “Which birds are able to learn the most behaviors?” And the answer should not have surprised me. According to the trainers, turkey vultures won by a factor of almost two to one. Using behavioral shaping as the criterion, vultures are more than twice as smart as eagles, hawks, or owls.

After extolling their intelligence and explaining that all of the trainers favored turkey vultures over almost all of the other resident birds because they were fun and friendly, the young biologist who was hosting our group continued with a discussion of the importance of the sometimes-vilified bird. Their unique physiology allows them to digest almost anything, including rotten carrion from roadsides, and when their digestive systems process replace it, the “new compound” has been completely sanitized. This process makes the turkey vulture nature’s complete sanitizing system. Without turkey vultures much of America would soon become rat infested.



Entry Sign for the Birds of Prey Center



The clinic, where bird patients are treated



The grounds, which are almost adjacent to the ocean, feature lovely hiking trails and scenic ponds.



One of the many flying bird shows

These days I have a newfound respect for the vultures, which come to Erie each spring. I look forward to their annual arrival.



The star of the show, a resident turkey vulture

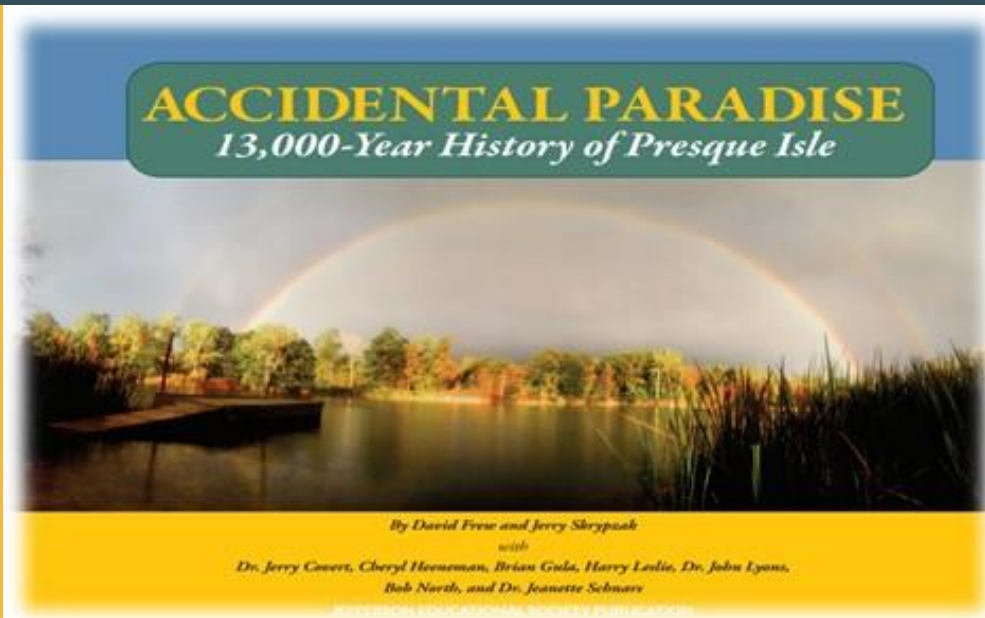
Author's note: To dispel any concerns that I may have scarred my little grandson Noah for life, I feel compelled to note that he grew up, graduated from Northwestern University, earned a Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics, and is now terrorizing his own students. His graduate education may have started with the vultures.

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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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