



Charles Anfield, CGCS, *Heritage Bluffs Golf Course*

## The Cleaner

We know in golf course maintenance that if we didn't do the daily work like raking bunkers, mowing greens, string trimming, and more the golf course would be a mess. A finely manicured golf course is no "accident," it takes a lot of team work.

A good maintenance program is always best served in small consistent doses. That way you don't wind up with the "big cleaning over haul." It's kind of like cleaning the kitchen floor. If you sweep and mop regularly, it's not a big deal to keep clean. If you don't do the work, a thick gunk build up is created from spilled food and drink, tracked in dirt, and other stuff from the outside world. Then it's down on your knees, scrubbing it by hand. A shiny kitchen floor is a lot like a golf course; they are expected to be clean and neat. When it's done up right, it looks so "money." Often times maintenance is only noticed when it is not completed.

Cleaners come in many shapes and sizes. Often times cleaners work at odd hours like the dark of night or the crack of dawn when no one's around. No one wants to see the cleaner do their dirty work.

We have these cleaners at Heritage Bluffs Public Golf Club, but I'm not talking about my crew.

Enter the ultimate cleaner *Cathartes aura*, common name Turkey Vulture. It means "purifier bird" in Latin and gets its common name from its resemblance to the male Wild Turkey. It is also known as a turkey buzzard or just plain buzzard. This bird has my respect. It's by no means a pretty bird. Some might say its down- right ugly. But as it has been said many times over, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

We have this flock that hangs out on a ridge overlooking a gravel pit on property south of the golf course. It's not actively being mined anymore. Who knows how long it will remain a gravel pit? For now the land lays quiet.

I see these birds just about every morning. As a group they gather overlooking the pit, serene, quiet and unmolested. Just "chillin." They are good neighbors to have. They rise at dawn together and wander over to the golf course to and stretch their wings. They are big birds and they have a sizable wingspan. They hang out a while on the turf and in the trees overlooking the pond with the egrets, geese and ducks before "launch en mass" and separate to fly out to the far reaches of the county in search of food.

I was so enamored by this bird I did some quick research on my large neighbors via the internet. I feel like Cliff Clavin from the hit television show "Cheers" but here goes:

- It is the most widely spread of the new world vultures. It ranges from southern Canada to the tip of South America. It is not related to the Old World vultures of Europe, Africa and Asia. It looks almost identical because of convergent evolution, where natural selection similarly shapes unrelated animals adapting to the same conditions.
- Inhabits a variety of open and semi open areas including subtropical forests, shrub lands, pastures and deserts.
- It is a scavenger feeding almost exclusively on carrion.
- Finds food with its sharp eyesight and a keen sense of smell. It has the ability to fly low to detect gases produced from the decay of dead animals.
- In flight it maximizes the efficiency of its large wingspread (6 feet) by riding the thermal updrafts.
- Lacks a syrinx, the vocal cord of birds. The only vocalizations it makes are low hisses or grunts.
- They roost in large communities. Nesting sites include: caves, hollow trees and thickets.
- Each year it generally hatches a couple of eggs. The chicks are fed by regurgitation.
- Has very few natural predators
- Protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.

I always enjoy seeing the birds glide back home when they arrive after a hard day of "cleaning the land of sorrow." Collectively, they gather and roost. Who knows what they might be discussing among themselves? I'm sure they would have some cool stories of nasty looking road kill they found or perhaps near misses with high speeding cars and trucks.

Thank you Cleaner. You are welcome on our golf course any day my wise old friend. Relax, refresh yourself with a drink and feel free to linger about on the lush green turf. For tomorrow, is another day. @