



Status of the King Vulture in Mexico and adjacent Central America

JACK CLINTON EITNIEAR


INTRODUCTION

Little is known regarding the distribution and status of a number of frequently encountered Cathartid vultures. One such species, the King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa*, is found in undisturbed tropical forest from southern Mexico to northern Argentina (Brown and Amadon 1968). Since 1976 I have been collecting data on the status and distribution of this species in Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. Field studies were made in Belize during the periods 1976-77 and 1980-81 and also in 1983. Mexico was visited 20 times between 1979 and 1984 while Guatemala was only briefly visited during 1976. In addition to my own personal observations, notes from numerous additional field researchers are included in the compilation of this report.

Mexico

Sutton (1972) recorded the species near Gomez Farias, Tamaulipas, in the early 1950's, but there have been no sightings in recent years in Tamaulipas or northern Veracruz. However an immature bird was observed near El Naranjo, San Luis Potosi, during the December 1982 Audubon Christmas Bird Count (Ben Felner, pers. comm.). Andrie (1967) lists the species as uncommon in the State of Veracruz. It has not been recorded during recent Audubon Christmas Bird Counts held in Catemaco, Veracruz, nor has it been seen there by myself or other field researchers in recent years. Mario Ramos (pers. comm.) noted its presence in the Tulxa Mountains of Veracruz and in southern Chiapas. Gary Falxa, (in litt.) states that in several seasons in the field in Tabasco and northern Chiapas no King Vultures were observed. In addition Bill Clark (pers. comm.) did not record the species in northern Chiapas during his field trips in the Palenque area during 1982-83.

The species is relatively abundant in southern Chiapas, as suggested by the following notes (Gary Falxa, pers. comm.):

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- 22 April 1977 - 6 adults on carcass along Rio Usumacinta, 10 km from confluence of Rio Salinas and Lacantun.
 - 24 April 1977 - Adult flying over Yaxchilan Ruins.
 - 7 July 1978 - Adult soaring over El Aguacero near Ocozocoautla, Chiapas.

Falxa also reported an adult soaring over highway 186 near the crossing of the Rio Chumpan in Campeche. In addition I observed an adult soaring 10 km west of Escarcega, Campeche, during June 1982. I have no records of the species in the State of Yucatan; I travelled throughout the peninsula during 1982 and 1983 but failed

to observe the species.

Guatemala

Land (1970) states that the species is fairly common in the lowland areas of Guatemala, but is rare above 900 m. Smithe (1966) mentions that the species is uncommon in the Tikal Ruins area of Peten. Despite this, Gary Falxa (pers. comm) observed two adults and a juvenile in the ruins area on 26 July 1978. I have little additional data from that country.

Belize

The species has been observed in all parts of the country except along the coast (Russell 1964). It is infrequently recorded in the northern portions of the country and in the pine/palm savannahs, and is most abundant in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve and adjoining tropical hardwood forest. The species is also frequently encountered in the southern hardwood forest and in adjoining cattle pastures when human presence is at a minimum. Ed Henckel and I observed several adult and immature birds feeding on a steer carcass 50 km west of Belize City on the Western Highway in 1983. Using sheep, goats and dog carcasses, a feeding station in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve attracted up to 18 King Vultures (Eitniear 1981). During the annual Christmas Bird Counts held in the Belmopan area from 1979-82, nine, eight, four and eleven birds were seen, respectively (Audubon Society Field Notes). Members of the Bronx jaguar research team noted the presence of the species in their study area in the Cockscomb Basin (Alan Rabinowitz pers. comm.) and Dahl (1983) observed the species in both the Bladen Branch and Mountain Pine Ridge areas.


SUMMARY

The King Vulture is a frequently encountered inhabitant of areas of undisturbed tropical forest. Its numerical status in Mexico has decreased in the northern States but it appears to be abundant in the southern States. Its status in Guatemala is uncertain but is under investigation. Although believed to be most abundant in Belize during the cattle ranching days of the early 1960's, its population appears to be increasing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals for sharing their field notes on Sarcoramphus: Bill Clark, Gary Falxa, Alan Rabinowitz, Mario Ramos, Dora Weyer, Ben Feltner and Jeremy Dahl. I am grateful to the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology for their generous support of my studies. I especially would like to thank the Ministry of Natural Resources of Belize for their assistance and interest in my continuing studies on their vultures.

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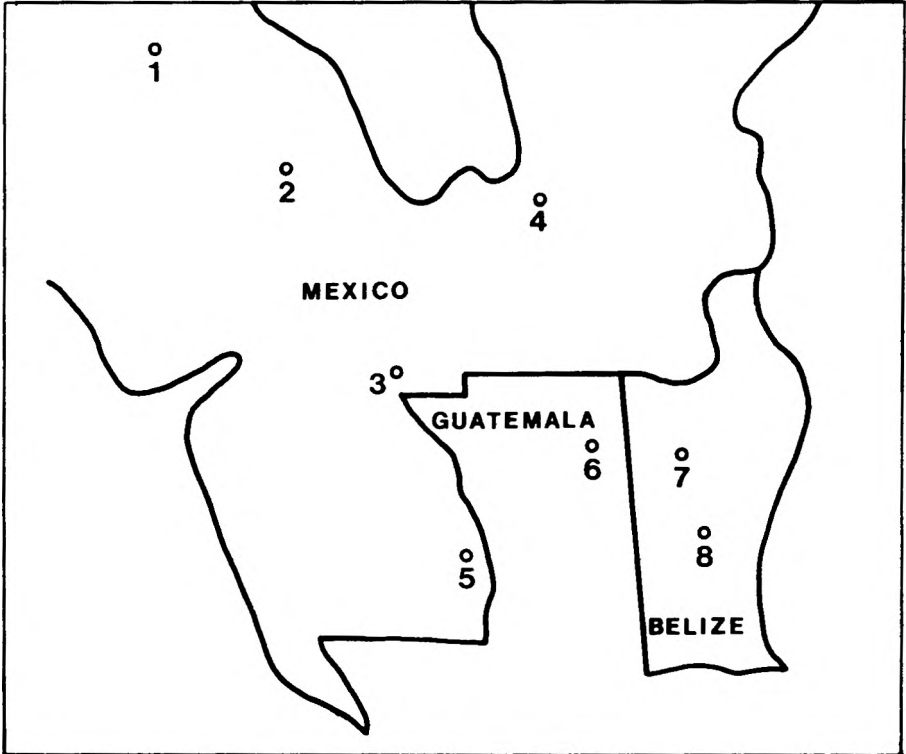


Places mentioned in the text

Mexico: 1 - El Naranjo, San Luis Potosi; 2 - Tuxla Mountains, Veracruz; 3 - Rio Usumancinta, Chiapas; 4 - Francisco Escarcega, Campeche; 5 - Yachilan, Bonampak Ruins, Chiapas.

Guatemala: 6 - Tikal Ruins, Peten.

Belize: 7 - Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve; 8 - Cockscomb Basin, Bladen Branch.



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Note: Audubon field notes are published by the National Audubon Society, New York; Christmas Bird Counts are generally in July issues.

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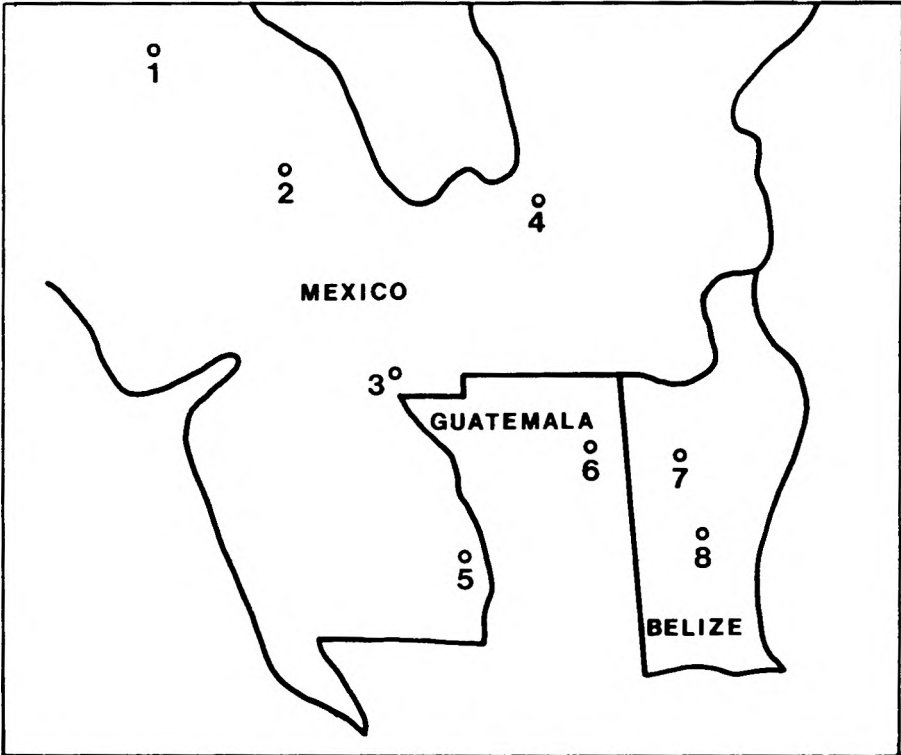
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