

The beauty in the buzzard: Bisbee celebrates the humble turkey vulture with parade, educational events

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Bisbeeites and visitors alike flock to Tombstone Canyon and Main Street to celebrate the commencement of spring as they welcome the turkey vultures last week.

BISBEE — Armadillo is bald, pees on her own leg when she gets too hot, and throws up rotten meat when she feels threatened.

She also plays a vital part in keeping the planet, and its inhabitants, healthy. The rescued black vulture, who traveled to Bisbee from Phoenix-based organization Liberty Wildlife on Saturday, drew quite a crowd when she made the rounds of the town during the third annual “Return of the Turkey Vultures” festival, educating children and adults alike about the fascinating, but sometimes maligned, bird.

“She can actually eat several times the botulism that would kill a human, and by the time it goes through her system, there's no botulism anymore,” explained Armadillo’s handler, Liberty Wildlife volunteer Anne Peyton, as they stood inside the Copper Queen Library.

“They are critical for our environment,” Peyton continued. “So the basic thing that a turkey vulture does and a black vulture does is that they will eat the dead animals that are out in the world . . . they will clean that up and help us keep disease down. So not only will they clean up the environment and help other animals be safe, but they also help us to be safe.”

While black vultures like Armadillo also live in Arizona, red-headed turkey vultures were the stars of the show in Bisbee on Saturday. Every March for three years, the town has held a parade, along with educational events, in honor of the area’s buzzards, who herald the return of spring by migrating back to Arizona from their winter homes in Central and South America.

“This is shedding light on a bird that is misunderstood,” said Library Manager Jason Macoviak. “I think having this opportunity to see these birds up close, and actually interact with them, (people) see they’re not these beastly creatures we make them out to be.”

Bisbee, always fond of celebrating the misunderstood and unique, first started the Return of the Turkey Vultures as a spoof of the longstanding “Return of the San Juan Capistrano Swallows,” in California, said organizer Cado Daily.

Saturday’s event culminated in a parade down Main Street, in which revelers clad in black and red swooped through town, passing out beaded necklaces, wielding giant vulture puppets, beating drums, and “eating” children dressed as roadkill while the Bisbee High School/Lowell School Band serenaded them from the Copper Queen Library balcony.

The parade finished up at Subway Street, where a “Buzzard Bash” commenced to raise money for the upkeep of Bisbee’s community pool.

Although the turkey vulture festivities first began as a way for Bisbee locals to celebrate and learn about their local fauna, word has gotten out about the unique event. Karen Gravenly, a South Carolina native who is currently working on Fort Huachuca, said she came down to Bisbee because she thought vultures “should be appreciated more.”

“I think it’s great, because it spreads awareness,” said Gravenly. “(It) debunks a lot of myths about how gross they are, and nasty they are, because they really are an important part of the ecosystem, and beautiful creatures.”

The annual event, although still in its early years, is well on its way to becoming a tradition in Bisbee, said Daily.

“Every year, it’s more fun,” she said. “And every year we add on a little bit more.”

