

Wild Wednesday 26 August 2020 by Walt Anderson

Look! Up in the sky. It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a . . . Turkey Vulture! Or is it?

In much of the country, this wouldn't be something to worry about. A large dark bird with contrasting pale white flight feathers, uptilted wings (dihedral), and tipsy flight would surely be our familiar TV.

In Arizona, however, there is an imposter, a look-alike, a copycat raptor: the Zone-tailed Hawk. When birds are soaring high, you could easily mistake the Zonetail for a vulture—same flight pattern, same contrasting wings—but a close look will reveal tail bands and a feathered head.

Scientists have evidence that this is mimicry, that a Zonetail, especially when in the company of vultures, can get closer to prey animals that have been habituated to the sight of the harmless scavengers. Researchers have documented that Zonetails can fly over an unsuspecting prey, find some screening cover like tree foliage, and come back in at an angle of attack that catches the victim off guard. To work, mimics must be much less common than the models, and that is certainly true for the uncommon Zonetail in country with plenty of vultures.

Zone-tailed Hawks nest in stately cottonwoods in the Granite Dells. Get too close to their nests and you will hear sharp descending screams as the concern bird makes a threatening sweep toward you. Best to leave them alone and consider yourself lucky to see this raptor that makes Arizona its summer home. The range of the species spreads throughout the New World tropics all the way to Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, and SW Brazil.

People often call a Turkey Vulture a “buzzard,” but that's one of the many mistakes that Europeans made when they came to the New World. Emigration to North America was not driven by birding interests! There were no bird feeders then, just bird eaters.

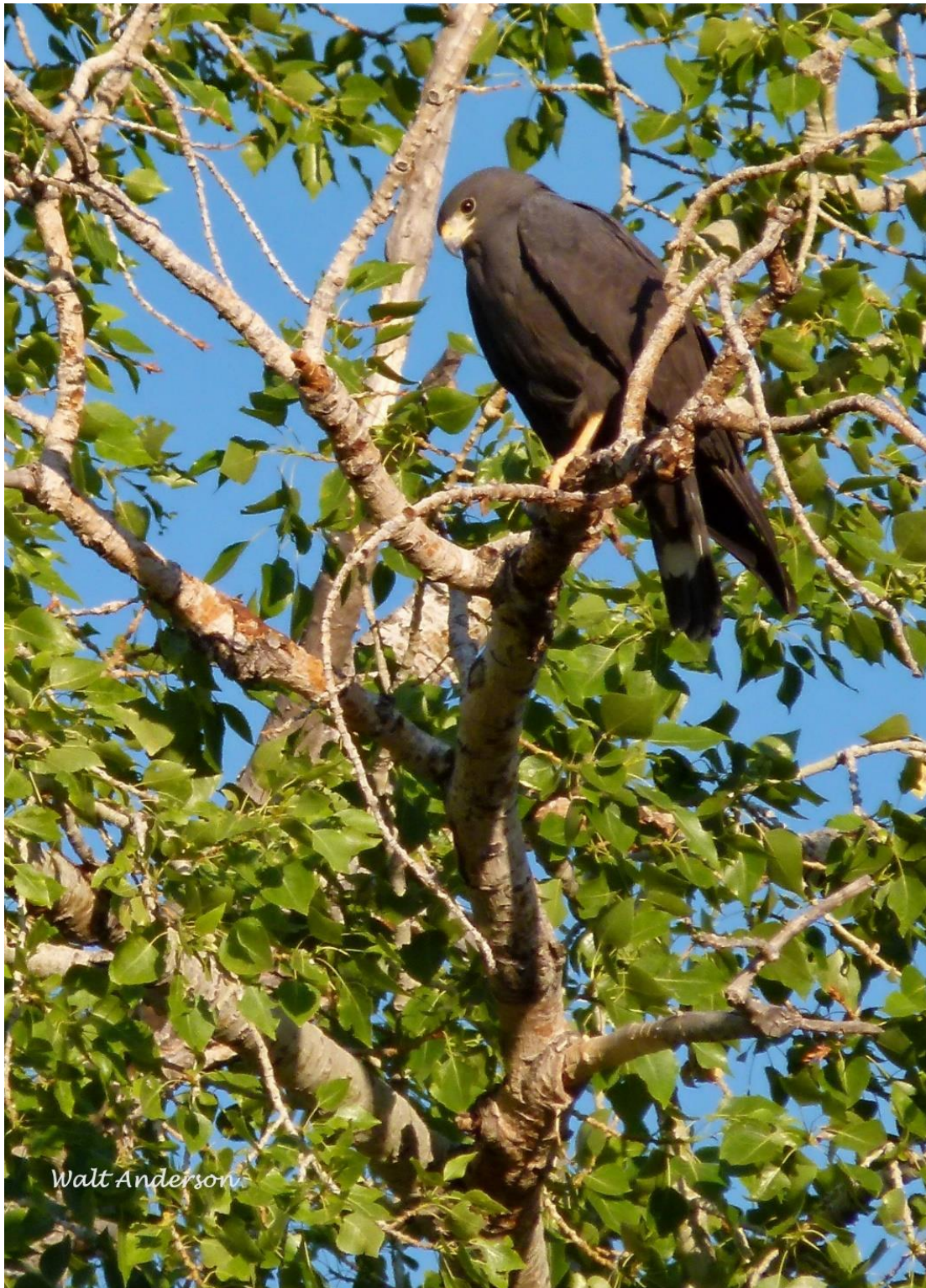
In the Old World, hawks of the genus *Buteo* were “buzzards.” Our Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*) is called the Rough-legged Buzzard in Europe. Thus if we were a bit more tuned to taxonomic history, our Zone-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albonotatus*) should be called the “Zone-tailed Buzzard”! Take that from me, an American Coot.



The familiar sight of a Turkey Vulture gliding by. Look alive!



Good lighting reveals this to be the mimic, the Zone-tailed Hawk, but poor lighting or inattention can let it get within striking distance of a naïve or complacent dove, lizard, cotton rat, or the like.



The Zonetail, here in a cottonwood, can sometimes be mistaken for another uncommon Southwest raptor, the Common Black Hawk (not common this far north, but another tropical or subtropical species whose range reaches northern South America). The latter is bulkier, with broad wings, long legs, and a broad white tail band.



Zone-tailed Hawks often prefer canyon terrain near water, as does this bird along Willow Creek in the Granite Dells of Prescott, Arizona.

