ABSTRACT

The foraging strategies of the Jamaican turkey vulture were studied from natural observations and provisional experiments. The study was divided into three main sections, the first of which was the searching behaviour, involving flight patterns, searching methods (height and group size) as well as the effects of wind speed, light and temperature. Birds searched singly most of the time, but were in communication with each other by occasionally overlapping their searching areas. They are low level searchers and are mostly seen between the hours of 1000 and 1500 on days of moderate wind speeds (4-9 mph). They feed preferentially on decaying carcasses located by a well developed sense of smell, with small assistance from sight.

The second section deals with the discovery of a carcass and the arrival of individuals to the feeding area, as well as the social interactions during feeding. The scout or individual finding a food source seldom fed alone, but instead left the area and returned with a group. Group members developed a linear hierarchy during the first few hours of the feed. Alpha and beta individuals fed on the softer entrails, while individuals further down in the hierarchy fed on muscle tissue and sometimes on skin. Birds attempting to feed alone spent more time looking up than any other activity, while birds in groups spent less time looking up and more time feeding. Group defense of the carcass was also evident until the food was completed in 3 to 4 days.

The third section is on the roosting areas of the birds. Roosts were always on very tall trees near gulleys and garbage disposal sites. Roost size varied considerably each day and few social interactions occurred between birds sharing a roosting area for a night.