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A-HED

It's Just Like Going Antiquing— Only for Roadkill

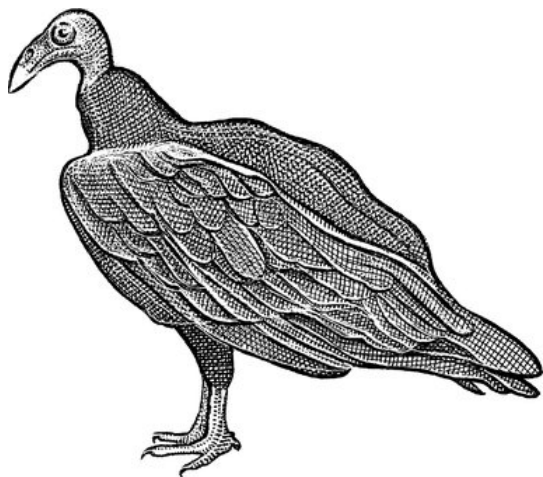
Hundreds of permit-carrying enthusiasts canvass the nation's highways and streets to collect flattened specimens in the name of science; help from a turkey vulture named Ed

By **DANIELA HERNANDEZ**

Updated Jan. 16, 2017 12:52 p.m. ET

About once a week in winter, Erin and Todd Katzner grab gloves and a shovel, hop in their truck and go hunting. What they don't bother to bring is a rifle. The wildlife they are aiming for has already bitten the dust.

The duo look for roadkill as they course along Idaho's roads. If they spot an animal that looks fresh, Dr. Katzner hops out and swings it into the back of the pickup.



ED THE TURKEY VULTURE

"I drive the getaway car," said Ms. Katzner. Roadkill has been a big part of their decadelong relationship. In 2014, they went on a Valentine's Day date to look for struck deer.

The Katzners are among hundreds of people who scour the nation's highways and streets for flattened fauna. Some are retired scientists; others dedicated hobbyists. For many, it is a lifelong pursuit—one that some think more people, especially more scientists, should adopt as a way to speed up research and conservation

efforts.

Combing for carcasses can help urban planners devise roads that minimize collisions, which can be fatal and costly, according to wildlife biologists and car-insurance data. It is also a cheap forensics tool to study changes in habitats, migration patterns, genetics and the spread of disease, biologists say.

And while it isn't exactly a competition, some like the bragging rights that go to whoever finds the most and rarest specimens. "It's nice to get a unique animal to keep it interesting," said Gary Rotta, a self-described roadkill forensics scientist and former wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, who once found a "smushed" sandhill crane.

In California, Doug Long, a biologist at St. Mary's College, goes prowling for roadkill regularly, sometimes even while vacationing. He logs each find in the California Roadkill Observation System, an online repository scientists use to study wildlife and the way



Todd and Erin Katzner in Alaska. PHOTO: CAROL MCINTYRE

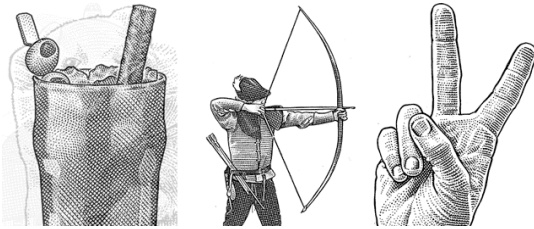
roads affect habitats.

Sometimes, he stops to examine his finds. In other cases, a peek out the window is enough to get the vitals: location, date and species.

“Because I’ve taught courses in wildlife identification...I have a very good ability to identify animals, even if it’s just part of them,” he said. “It’s not like a superpower.”

Not just anyone can go around scraping up specimens. Various laws limit the wildlife private citizens can legally possess, dead or alive. Birds, for instance, are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, restricting who can handle even parts of them, including feathers.

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Permit-wielding roadkill scavengers are allowed to collect the deceased, and it generally must be for scientific or educational purposes, according to Craig Tabor, a senior special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Some states allow the public to keep—

and even eat—certain roadkill, like deer, as long as they register their prey with the appropriate agency.

Authorities worry that loosening restrictions on roadkill could facilitate poaching of live animals because people could more easily claim they were found dead on the road, according to Laura Patterson, amphibian and reptile conservation coordinator at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Dr. Katzner, who occasionally turns roadkill into venison chili and tacos, has federal and dozens of state permits. He heads up a network of 400 volunteers in several states who collect deer, raccoons and skunks among others. His army of roadkill hunters use the departed as bait to entice golden eagles to 200 sites where they have cameras to monitor the birds.

They have amassed more than one million images, which Dr. Katzner, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, and his team are analyzing to study golden eagle populations.

One of his recruits is biologist Pete Bloom. He contributes to eagle research and conducts roadkill-powered science of his own: monitoring turkey vultures, whose populations have dwindled in recent years.

On a recent Saturday morning, he removed half of a musky deer from a freezer in his garage, where he stores roadkill. Dr. Bloom, who runs a consultancy called Bloom Biological Inc., has a roadkill biobank scattered across three freezers on his property in Santa Ana, Calif.

He loaded the antlered creature into the back of his SUV and drove to an animal shelter to pick up Ed, a turkey vulture who doubles as his research assistant. The trio then traveled to a nearby water basin, where Dr. Bloom’s team had set up a modified dog



Wildlife biologist Todd Katzner drags roadkill to an eagle trap on Christmas 2015. PHOTO: ERIN KATZNER

kennel
with a one-
way
opening.

Dr. Bloom
put Ed in
the metal
cage—birds
are more
likely to
congregate
if another
is present.
Then he
set the
deer, with

its stiff, grayish tongue sticking out, inside next to the door. “There’s going to be a big party here,” he said. “Venison is the main fare.”

Dinner was just far enough out of reach that wild vultures have to hop in, unaware there is no way out.

Within a week, Dr. Bloom can trap about 20 birds. His team takes blood samples for analysis to see what might be harming the vultures, and then releases them.

The roadkill platter needs to be replenished about once a week. Dr. Bloom said he always scans roads for signs of the defunct—wings or legs sticking out at weird angles make them easier to spot.

He occasionally peels good-looking specimens off the pavement and donates them to museums, where they become part of research collections. He once recovered a red-tailed hawk he had tagged with sensors decades earlier, after a truck hit it on a military base. It was a bittersweet find, he said.



Greg Pauly, assistant curator of herpetology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, holds a roadkill snake specimen in his lab. PHOTO: ISAAC HERNÁNDEZ HERRERO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

If “it’s not road pizza...it has lots of potential future use,” said Greg Pauly, assistant curator of herpetology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, who often carries ethanol-filled test tubes to preserve tissue samples, Ziploc bags and a cooler in case he comes across a meaty roadside specimen. A rattlesnake he found is now part of a Los Angeles biodiversity exhibit at the museum, and some finds are powering his research on how gopher-snake diets have changed thanks to urbanization.

At the Field Museum in Chicago, scientists are using tissues from car-trodden barred owls to study genetics and evolution. These birds have expanded rapidly across the Great Plains and into the Pacific Northwest. They can’t always beat traffic, but they’re out-competing the spotted owl, which is endangered in the region.

“It’s a major conservation issue,” said John Bates, the Field Museum’s associate curator of birds. “What makes barred owls so successful? We’re still looking...15, 20 years ago

when salvage work started going, nobody was thinking about the fact we might get genetic data from these samples.”

Some of the data can be accessed online through VertNet, a casualty list of sorts that spans dozens of museum collections. Roadkill is tagged “DOR,” shorthand for “dead on road.”

Write to Daniela Hernandez at daniela.hernandez@wsj.com

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