CHASED OUT BY VULTURES:

Henry David Thoreau went to Walden to live deeply and to find out if life was mean or sublime. He found it to be sublime.

But what is sublime in the grand scheme of things can be mean at the local level. In a recent case involving protected species vs. private interest, Dan and Sue Cullen and their children Craig and Cassandra from Hopkinton, R.I., lost their truck, home and stone-masonry business to turkey vultures (Cathartes aura) before heading west to some undisclosed location to begin life anew.

The Cullen's problem, according to a story in the Providence Journal, began when they bought a fixer-upper in March 2002, when the vultures were still wintering in southern climes. Then, like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie, the turkey vultures (along with a few black vultures, Coragyps atratus) returned to roost in a stand of tall trees behind their house.

With vultures, what goes in one end need not come out the other. Vomiting while coughing is their primary means of self-defense. Predators with sensitive stomachs are usually deterred by greasy, hairy gobs of semi-digested vulture puke. Alternatively, predators with extra tough stomachs will eat the vomit instead of the bird.

But if vulture food does come out the other end, it's a squirt of lumpy white paste. Technically, birds don't defecate or urinate. Instead they empty their intestinal and urinary tracts into a common reservoir called a cloaca, the Latin word for sewer. Then, when so moved, a singular muscular spasm will squeeze out the lumpy white paste.

This roosting flock had what biologists call site tenacity. They've been coming for at least 20 years, and just won't leave. And Dan couldn't make them leave because they are protected by the Migratory Bird Act of 1918, which gave federal protection to more than 800 species, including the majestic bald eagles and neo-tropical songbirds such as the red-winged blackbird, the northern cardinal and the cedar waxwing. The turkey vulture made the list because it soars majestically and does a wonderful job cleaning up carrion, especially roadkill.

Day after day, the birds behind the Cullen's home flew away to gather carrion and take small prey. Night after night they returned to roost in the trees and vented their federally protected cloacae. The trees were soon painted with guano, stinking to high heaven and with a uric acid concentration high enough to sting the eyes. The yard and their vehicles were similarly blotched. The fetid smell of recycled roadside death sickened the family; one developed asthma. Soaking rains polluted their well. The cat feared for its life, and had the scars to prove why.

After finding out that he would face up to $15,000 in fines or up to six months in jail for killing or harassing the birds or altering their habitat, Dan tried every legal means to dispose of them: banging pots and pans, buying a barking dog, flying kites and tethered mylar balloons and shooting fireworks, air horns, paintball guns. Nothing worked.

Meanwhile, friction developed with the neighbors. Hundreds of hours were spent dealing with local, state and federal officials, and with medical issues related to vulture excrement. In a classic case of "too little too late," and after spending more than $10,000 of his own money, Dan finally got a permit to kill up to 20 birds. But by then, the truck and house were in the process of being re-possessed by the bank. The Cullen's dreams of "happily ever after" went down the cloaca (sewer).
Though I sympathize with the family, I would be even more saddened by the loss of a species doing its natural thing. So, I'll side with the regulators on this one. The occasional loss of a cow to a Yellowstone grizzly, a sheep to a California cougar or a cat to a Connecticut coyote is the price we must pay to experience the sublime. Tough choices must be made to ensure that other creatures can live on this planet besides rats, cockroaches and humans.

I hope the Cullen's aren't heading for Nevada because that's where the Turkey Vulture Society is headquartered as a 501(C)(3) scientific nonprofit corporation. This group is dedicated to the appreciation and preservation of vultures.