



Taxonomy & Range

Black vultures belong to a group of raptors called New World vultures, which include seven species living in North and South America. There are three species within the United States: turkey vulture, California condor, and the black vulture. Black vultures belong in North America and have lived here since the last ice age. Recently, they have been steadily expanding their range northward. Proposed reasons for this include a warming climate, the phasing out of the harmful insecticide DDT, increased changes to the landscape, shifts in foraging strategies, and changes in the availability of roadkill. Above all, black vultures have expanded their range because of their resilience and ability to co-exist and thrive in human-dominated landscapes.

Identification

It's easy to confuse the black vulture with their close cousin, the turkey vulture. Here are several key differences:



Turkey Vulture

Red head
Dark brown body
Silver lining on underside of wing
Fly with "v-shaped" profile, deeper wingbeats, and a wobble

Black Vulture

Blackish-gray head
Black body
White patch on wing tip
Short squared-off tail
Fly with flat profile, quick wingbeats, and no wobble



FUN FACTS

Black vultures cannot pick up pets and carry them away. Their feet are like those of a chicken. They cannot seize or grasp like other raptors.

Black vulture parents share incubation and feeding responsibilities and show affection towards their young.



Black vultures are the heaviest vultures in the eastern United States, weighing 4.5 to 5.2 pounds.

The oldest individual black vulture on record was at least 25 years and 6 months old.



Black vultures are the most numerous vulture species in the Western Hemisphere, nesting from southern South America up through the Northeastern United States.

Black vultures have no voice box, so rather than singing or calling they make hissing and grunting noises.

Black vultures are curious and learn easily. In rehabilitation centers they quickly take on new behaviors, such as jumping to specific perches, quickly finding hidden mice, and playing with shoelaces.

References

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Images courtesy of Phil Camphill, Alejandra Lewandowski, and Tom Buehl. Text by Zoey Greenberg and Bracken Brown. Production of this publication sponsored by Linda and Tom Nicholl.

THE BLACK VULTURE

Nature's Clean-Up Crew



Black vultures are gregarious scavengers that have learned to thrive in a changing world.

They efficiently remove dead animals, gut piles, and their remains from the environment. This reduces the spread of bacteria, disease, and odors. They provide an irreplaceable service that benefits people and the ecosystem as a whole – and they do it for free!



Threats Facing Black Vultures Today

Paramount among threats to vultures in North America is the public's prevailing attitude that they are ugly, aggressive, and bothersome. At Hawk Mountain, we believe the opposite. Black vultures are an essential part of our shared ecosystem, with unique and admirable characteristics that we are only beginning to understand.



Black vultures can exhibit behaviors that are annoying and frustrating for homeowners, such as an affinity for chewing on rubber and the harassment of weak livestock. Understandably, these behavioral patterns don't help the species' reputation.

Black vultures also perch in the wind breaks of mature trees that are planted alongside buildings and farmsteads. These trees offer phenomenal spots for vultures to sun their wings, a common behavior in the morning before they take flight. Buildings that are constructed from heat-retaining materials also attract vultures by providing a warm roost, and by producing rising columns of warm air called thermals. These provide ideal flight conditions for soaring scavengers like vultures, who'd rather spend their time effortlessly looking for food than trying to stay aloft.

Vultures are just being vultures. We believe that by understanding the context of their behaviors, we can lessen human-vulture conflicts as a community.



Why Vultures Matter

Vultures are nature's clean-up crew, efficiently consuming carcasses that could otherwise spread harmful bacteria and disease. They reduce the odor and possible health threat from overabundant roadkill, and kickstart the essential process of decomposition upon which many other organisms depend.



A Cautionary Tale

Asia, Africa, and Europe have experienced rapid declines of vulture populations over the last 20 years due to deliberate and accidental poisoning, among other threats. With fewer vultures, carcasses festered and attracted wild dogs which led to a surge in rabies cases in humans. *The decline in vultures resulted in skyrocketing medical and financial challenges for many countries.*

Prior to these declines, no one studied vultures and so no one recognized how quickly their numbers were plummeting until it was too late. As stated by Hawk Mountain's founder Rosalie Edge, "The time to protect a species is while it's still common."

Black vultures are still common, and they are still necessary. Here in the Americas, we can learn from the declines overseas, and proactively understand and conserve the vultures we are lucky to have. We benefit from their clean-up services, yet we often take this for granted. By recognizing the importance of black vultures and taking the time to understand their unique behaviors, we can indeed coexist.

How Hawk Mountain Sanctuary is Helping

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary has been conducting studies on population trends and movement ecology of black vultures since 2005. By shedding light on their behavior and habitat use, we hope to understand black vulture ecology and provide quality information to communities living alongside vulture families.



Legal Status

All black vultures are federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. In the state of Pennsylvania, they are protected as non-game birds, and both a federal and state permit is required to trap, kill, relocate, or handle vultures. Their eggs are included in this protection.

A Final Word

Black vultures are charismatic, adaptable, clever, and ecologically important raptors. Their contributions to our ecosystem cleanliness and health are often underappreciated. Where people succeed so too does the black vulture, which helps minimize human caused waste in the environment. The next time you see a black vulture, we encourage you to take a moment and remember that without vultures, our landscape would look and smell very different - and not for the better.

What Makes Black Vultures Unique

They are highly social.

Communal roosting, group feeding, and collective soaring are just a few examples that characterize black vulture society. Vultures engage in a phenomenon called "information sharing," in which they follow other scavengers to locate food. Communal roosts serve an important hub for sharing information. There is also evidence that black vultures sometimes maintain family associations for more than 8 months after the young have left the nest. These extended relationships may increase the youngsters' chances of survival by allowing them easier access to carcasses. In a study conducted in North Carolina, family members were often recorded preening each other, and defending each other from aggressive attacks by other vultures.

They are one of the most adaptable species on the planet.

In a time when extinction is increasing at an alarming rate, we see adaptable species thrive while the specialists struggle. Black vultures are a poster child for flexibility. Black vultures are human commensals, meaning they tend to go where humans go. Rather than shrinking away from human habitation as many other species must, black vultures have learned to take advantage of human landscapes, feeding at garbage dumps, using buildings as roost sites, and consuming gut piles from hunters.

They are long-lived, and long-standing.

Black vultures can live for up to 25 years. Like many other long-lived animals, they raise few offspring each year, with a clutch size of two. Their successful foraging strategies, inquisitiveness, and prior experience make them well suited for establishing themselves in a new region. They have been on this Earth for a long time, with fossils dating back to at least 34 million years ago.

