

Backyard Black Vultures

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BENEFIT BOTH HUMANS AND VULTURES



Poor PR

Vultures have long suffered poor public relations ever since Charles Darwin described them as “disgusting birds” meant to “revel in putridity.” Cartoons, myths and legends, along with sightings of birds at roadkill, have long kept people at a distance.

But people and vultures often share the same space and may be your neighbors. These adept scavengers live in a human-dominated landscape where roads, landfills, and agriculture provide many feeding opportunities, and we benefit from their clean-up more than we realize.

While globally some vulture populations are in steep decline, the black vulture population here has seen a steady rise

and northward range expansion. This has led to an increase in human-vulture interactions and a rise in conflicts that could be reduced if people understood black vultures better.

This document is to provide background on black vulture behaviors and offer nonlethal methods to reduce human-vulture conflicts from home.

Turkey Vultures

Red heads

Dark brown body

“Silver lining” on underside of wing

Fly with “v-shaped” profile, deeper wingbeats, and a wobble



Black Vultures

Blackish-gray heads

Black body

White patch on wing tip

Fly with flat profile, quick wingbeats, no wobble, and have a short, squared-off tail

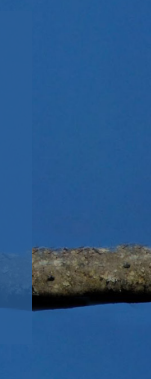


Photo: Bill Moses



Keep an Eye Out

How can you tell the difference between a black vulture and a turkey vulture?

Photo: Bill Moses

Vulture Behavior

First, it is helpful to understand the birds' social structure. These intelligent, long-lived scavengers are equipped to take advantage of small to large pieces of carrion, typically rotting animal remains. They are highly social and choose to roost together in communal roosts that can range from just a few to several hundred. Black vultures don't forage at random but incorporate reliable food sources into their daily movements and will continue to visit them frequently. Landfills provide a steady supply of reliable feeding stations that can support massive flocks.

Most black vulture roosts have several features in common: they like large mature trees with an open canopy that allow easy entry and exit, a nearby water source to drink and

bathe, and close access to reliable thermal updrafts to assist with flight. Cell towers provide an excellent elevated point. Young birds may stay with their parents for more than six months.

When selecting homes, people in rural areas also often congregate near water, plant conifer wind breaks near buildings, and have open fields or yards that provide thermal lift. This unintentionally invites black vultures to set up their home roosts in such backyards.



Photo: Phil Camphill

Vulture Damage

When fortified with plenty of food along with their natural curiosity, black vultures will spend the day thoroughly exploring the area around their roost. They also wait until thermal lift develops before departing the roost to forage in the morning, leaving them several hours to investigate roofs, sheds, playsets, fences, and vehicles. Old outbuildings can easily become a black vulture nest box.

Because loafing vultures habitually pick at anything that is not nailed down, this can result in damages. Black vultures have been documented removing rubber liner and wipers from vehicles, extracting shingles from roofs, emptying garbage cans looking for scraps, and playing with toys and tools left out on lawns. High use areas will show the telltale white-wash along with scratches from their nails. The exact reasons black vultures spend so much time tactilely exploring their surroundings is unknown, but food sources will only reinforce this behavior. For example, once one vulture finds cat food left outside, a flock may quickly queue up for dinner. If it happens frequently enough, the birds will learn to apply the same tactic at another home, which can be both surprising and disconcerting to the pet owner as these brazen birds appear outside the window expecting to be fed.

Agriculture

Agriculture offers many attractants for black vultures. Fence posts provide excellent roost structures to dry off while waiting for thermals. Wildlife carcasses caused by hay mowing are a predictable food source. Most farm managers dispose of carcasses in farmstead livestock dumps that make excellent feeding stations for foraging vultures.

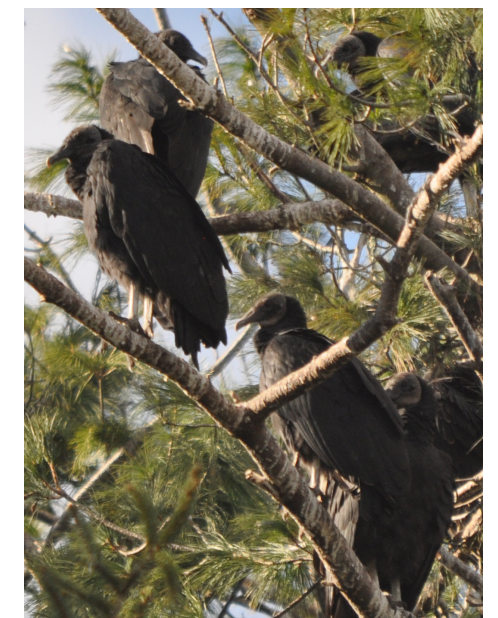
Unfortunately, vultures can hinder some farm activities. Synchronized birthing events can result in an excess of afterbirth, drawing many vultures to a site. Witnessing the black vultures jockeying for afterbirth will agitate most herd animals causing further problems.

Most vultures are not preying on livestock, but rather a group of black vultures sometimes will await the remnants that is left after an animal gives birth. However, a few black vultures occasionally will work together to weaken and eventually prey upon newborn animals. This behavior appears to be learned within a flock, and as flocks grow, so do the number of issues. To keep this behavior from spreading, farmers are encouraged to provide protection for their livestock during the birthing stage. This will discourage the behavior over the long-term.

Public Facilities

Black vultures are known to congregate in huge flocks near landfills that provide many foraging opportunities. Preferred roosts on buildings at such sites quickly become covered in white-wash, which can strip paint, short out wires, and interfere with operations. A concentration of vultures roosting on a cell tower can also impact coverage, and people unaccustomed to interacting with wildlife can be taken aback by these large birds.

Boat launches are another public setting where black vultures may become a nuisance. Launches provide excellent perches, are by the water, and offer abundant scraps from fishing. The vultures will perch on unattended vehicles and boats, picking at rubber and leaving scratches on vehicles.



Typical Vulture Complaints



Photo: Tom Buehl

Roosts on private property



Damage to buildings



Agricultural nuisance behavior



How to disperse a flock

Although vultures are a critical part of the ecosystem, it is important to act quickly to disperse a flock from a home or facility. It is very difficult to discourage an established flock that has learned to expect food or other resources. There are several methods available, but fast action is a must.



- Remove anything that actively attracts black vultures, including food and perch sites. It is critical to remove or reduce carcasses or other foods available to vultures.
- Discourage property damage by covering valuables and removing perches. Use bird guard spikes on decking and roof peaks or hang reflective tape and silver pie pans around perching areas to dissuade the birds.
- Scare vultures with an active dog on the property to discourage vultures that gather.
- Disturb the birds near dusk to keep a vulture group from settling in for the night. Pyrotechnics, lasers, and loud noises work well, but must be used consistently for at least a week at established roosts. Depending on the height of the roost, low-cost pots and pans with yelling can quickly disperse a flock.
- Spray the perch with hoses to bump the birds off roosts or purchase a motion-activated sprinkler aimed at roosting site. A mylar balloon held on a long string will also help. Always review your proposed methods prior to use with the local office of US Department of Agriculture and your local law offices.
- Hanging effigies of dead vultures is sometimes recommended to disperse turkey vultures but rarely works for black vultures.
- Avoid planting conifer windbreaks that mature into optimal vulture roosts, or consider removing them.
- Do not keep livestock carcass dumps near a herd, especially during birthing. Burying carcasses will further limit the number of birds using the property.
- If vultures attack young livestock, bring the herd into a barn during birthing to lessen attacks when livestock is most vulnerable. If no barn is available, keep a dog with the herd to displace birds before they can kill livestock.

Conclusion

Non-lethal solutions to vulture conflicts will endure much longer than lethal methods. Vultures learn from other vultures, so if you work with your local flock to establish new patterns of behavior, you can find a lasting solution.

Black and turkey vultures are critically important to all landowners! They clean our roadways, reduce carcass numbers, and lessen the spread of disease. If we see more vultures, this indicates that there is plenty of carrion or similar food available.

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Learn about Vulture Ecology

Hawk Mountain is actively researching black vulture populations and movement ecology and encourages you to join us as a citizen scientist. Colored wing-tags with a unique numeric code make our study vultures easy to spot and identify. Report tag number, color, behavior and location at hawkmountain.org/vulturesightings.

To learn about our black vulture research and to view movement tracking maps, visit hawkmountain.org/research/black-vulture.