

BLACK VULTURE



Classification

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Cathartiformes

Family: Cathartidae

Genus: *Coragyps*

Species: *atratus*



Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Mid-Atlantic through the southern United States as well as Central and South America. Range has increased northward over the last few decades.
- **Habitat:** Generally found within open areas of forested environments. Soar above open areas looking for food, but nest and roost in wooded areas. Not common at higher altitudes. Have been observed roosting on utility poles in urban and suburban areas and circling landfills.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern

Physical Characteristics

- **Body Length:** 23.6 to 26.8 inches (60-68 cm)
- **Wingspan:** 4.5 to 5.0 feet (1.3-1.5 m)
- **Weight:** 3.5 to 4.8 pounds (1.6-2.2 kg)
- **Lifespan:** Up to 20 years in the wild and over 30 years in human care.
- **Identifying Traits:** Black or gray featherless heads. The beak is a dark bill with a bone-colored tip, nares are medium size. Feathers are soot black except for the five major primary feathers which are white tipped underneath the wing tip. They have a long neck and a squared tail. When gliding, they rarely flap their broad flat wings, as this allows them to soar in small thermals using quick, labored wing beats, alternating with short glides. Soar at heights slightly higher than Turkey Vultures.

Behaviors

- **Feeding:** Scavengers that feed primarily on carrion. They are flat footed, with blunted nails, lacking the powerful talons found in other raptors. Locate prey by sight while soaring high in the sky and spotting carcasses. They will also follow Turkey Vultures, which have a more developed sense

of smell. They gather in large groups to push out Turkey Vultures from the food once located. They are also known to locate food in dumpsters and landfills that humans have thrown away.

- **Breeding:** Monogamous and typically remain together year-round. The courtship may include birds spiraling high in the air or on the ground. The male may walk in circles around the female, strutting with neck extended, and making hissing sounds.
- **Nesting:** Do not build a nest, instead lay eggs in dark cavities on the ground, under cover, in tree stumps or sometimes in caves or abandoned buildings. They lay 1 to 3 eggs directly on the ground. They feed their young for up to eight months after their young have fledged. Vultures also often stay together in family groups.
- **Migration:** Resident to short distance migrant.
- **Call:** Vultures do not have a voice box, but make a raspy, drawn-out hissing sound while feeding and fighting, along with grunting and woofing noises that sound like pigs. Courting vultures may make yapping sounds.

Fun Facts!

- In the United States, Turkey Vultures are more prevalent by number, however Black Vultures have a larger range and are the most abundant vulture in the Western Hemisphere.
- A few individuals to hundreds of birds may make up a flock of Black Vultures.
- Black Vultures hold their wings flat while soaring as well as have more frequent wing beats and rock less in comparison to Turkey Vultures.
- Their mite is found to be free of bacteria, viruses, and fungi due to the strong enzymes and acids in their stomach which kills off dangerous toxins and microorganisms.
- Have broad, plank-like wings that allow them to soar in small thermals and rarely flap their wings.
- Maintain close social relationships throughout their lives with extended family members but tend to be aggressive towards individuals that are not a part of their family circle.

Importance of vultures

- Through eating carrion, they not only recycle important proteins and nutrients in the dead bodies of the animals they eat, but they also lessen the potential exposure of humans and other animals to diseases.

Sources

- https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black_Vulture/lifehistory
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- <https://www.hawkmountain.org/raptors/black-vulture>
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- <https://www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/vultures/black-vulture>
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