



# Vultures

Vultures, also mistakenly called buzzards, are large, blackish birds with broad wingspans, often seen soaring in wide circles in the sky. They are active in the daytime, when they search for carrion to eat. As scavengers, vultures have an important role in the ecosystem by hastening the decomposition of dead animals, consequently helping to prevent certain diseases that may be harmful to other animals and humans. Sometimes they perch in trees or stand on the ground, usually near a dead animal. Although graceful in flight, they are clumsy on the ground.

Seven species of vultures inhabit the Americas, including the endangered California condor. Pennsylvania has two species: the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*). The turkey vulture is the more common and widespread vulture in Pennsylvania. The turkey vulture is found statewide, while the black vulture, is found mostly in the southern counties. Both of these vultures have increased in recent decades with the black vulture especially expanding its breeding range northward. Both of these vultures are tolerant of human activities, enabling them to coexist in close proximity to people. Both are protected by game laws.

## Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*)

The black vulture, between 24 and 27 inches in length, with a wingspan less than 5 feet, is smaller than the turkey vulture. The black has a short, squared tail and gray to black featherless head. Because its wings form less sail area, it is not as efficient at soaring as the turkey vulture and must fly using several rapid wing flaps followed by a short sail.

Airborne, the black vulture shows distinctive white patches on the undersides of the wings near the tips. The black holds its wings more horizontally than does the turkey vulture. In both species, their naked heads look so small for the size of the bird that from a distance they sometimes appear almost headless. This small head in relation to body size is a good field mark to help distinguish a soaring black vulture from other large birds such as the golden eagle and bald eagle. The white wing patches are also good field marks.

black vulture



turkey vulture

The black vulture has expanded its range in the Northeast and is commonly found in southeastern Pennsylvania. Breeding Bird Surveys indicate a 10% annual increase between 1966 and 2009 in the state. Its breeding range now extends from the southern edge of Canada to southern South America and it is found year round over much of this range except for birds in more northern latitudes, which migrate southward in fall.

Black vultures are found in open habitats such as farmland and open woodland. They roost in large trees in woodlands but forage in open spaces. Unlike turkey vultures, black vultures are unable to locate food by scent alone and must rely on sight or by taking advantage of an existing feeding opportunity. Black vultures may detect, sometimes from great distances, and follow a descending vulture to a carcass. In this way, turkey vultures often inadvertently lead black vultures to a food source, much to the disadvantage of the turkey vulture, as aggressive black vultures feed in larger groups and may displace a turkey vulture from carrion that it found.

## black vulture



Black vultures are adaptable and can thrive in human-influenced environments. Living in close proximity with humans, they regularly forage at landfills and garbage dumps, sewers and the refuse pits of poultry and cattle farms. Vulture-related conflicts sometimes occur in agriculture areas as black vultures occasionally prey on newborn livestock. They are much more aggressive than the more common and widespread turkey vulture.

These highly social birds gather in large communal roosts that help foster their strong social bonds and provide a meeting point for foraging groups.

The nest site choices of these two vultures are similar. Black vultures may nest in a rock pile, cave, rock cavity, hollow tree or the isolated recesses of human structures such as abandoned buildings. They do not build a nest; instead the female lays her eggs on the bare surface of the nest site. Eggs, usually two per clutch, are similar in size to turkey vulture eggs, but are grayish-green to blue-white with brown or lavender blotches and spots. Both sexes participate in incubation, which takes 28 to 39 days.

### Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

The turkey vulture is the chief avian scavenger of the United States including Pennsylvania where it is a common sight. The turkey vulture specializes in foraging for small food

items, mostly mammals, and regularly consumes road-killed wild animals. Adults are about 30 inches in length, with wingspans up to 6 feet. Their bodies are covered with blackish-brown feathers, and sexes are colored alike. Seen from below, a turkey vulture's wings appear two-toned, the flight feathers lighter-colored than the rest of the feathering. Turkey vultures soar with wings held above the horizontal, forming a pronounced V-shape or dihedral. The birds rock and tilt unsteadily in the air, sometimes very low to the ground, soaring with few wing beats. Their V-shaped flight profile and rocking flight habit make them easy to tell apart from eagles or large hawks like the red-tailed hawk.

The turkey vulture was named because of the resemblance of its naked head to that of a wild turkey. To probe deeply into carrion without becoming overly messy, the head and neck are unfeathered "like the bare arms of a butcher" wrote an early naturalist. Adults have a pinkish to bright red head and neck; in young birds, these skin areas are blackish. The turkey vulture's pale, heavy bill has a sharp hook at the end for tearing. Its toes are equipped with strong, curved talons.

Vultures are essentially voiceless; lacking a syrinx, or vocal organ, all they can do is hiss, whine and grunt. They have keen vision and a sharp sense of smell and use both to locate carrion. Their olfactory organs are large and well supplied with nerve endings. This highly developed sense of smell enables turkey vultures to find carrion under the cover of a dense forest canopy.

Vultures are efficient soarers, their long, broad wings holding them aloft like kites. In a rising current of air, a vulture can maintain or even increase altitude without flapping its wings. Since they don't use their wings as much as most birds, vultures have relatively small breast muscles. Like many hawks and falcons, vultures like to migrate along mountain ridges, using thermal updrafts to help keep airborne. They may remain on their roosts for several days when rainy weather makes soaring difficult.

Observations from gliders show that the turkey vulture has a lower sinking speed than the black vulture. Vultures eat all kinds of carrion, including fish, snakes, winter- and highway-killed wild animals, domestic animals, and slaughterhouse refuse. Unlike black vultures, turkey vultures almost never attack live prey, but will occasionally take a small snake or mammal.

Favored breeding habitat includes most areas of Pennsylvania where an ample supply of carrion is available. They are found in open environments and inhabit the fringes of urban and suburban developments, farmland and forested areas. They nest in sheltered, inaccessible areas that are undisturbed such as caves and rock crevices, ledges of steep cliffs, hollow trees and logs, dense thickets, abandoned hawk nests and heron nests and abandoned or seldom used buildings.

Vultures make little or no nest, depositing their eggs on the ground, in gravel on cliff ledges, or on rotted sawdust or chips in logs and stumps.

The female lays one to three eggs, typically two. Eggs are 2¾ to 3 inches long by 1¾ to 2 inches wide, elliptical or long-oval. Their shells are smooth to slightly grainy, dull or creamy white, overlain with irregular spots and blotches of pale and bright brown.

Both parents share incubating duties. After 30 to 40 days, the eggs hatch into altricial young that remain in the nest for 8 to 11 weeks. The young birds eat carrion regurgitated to them by their parents. Careful concealment of an inaccessible nest is important at this time, as the carrion's stench may attract potential predators.

Vultures are gregarious; groups of 8 to 25 or more adults and juveniles may wheel in the sky or roost together in trees. Although turkey vultures like to nest in caves, they apparently rarely enter them at other times of the year and do not use them for winter shelter. Both young birds and adults molt

once each year. This gradual molt occurs from late winter or early spring until early fall.

The turkey vulture is a year-round resident of Pennsylvania, but individuals migrate south even if for short distances. It is a common migrant in late February and March. In summer, it breeds throughout the state, expanding from its former range of only the southern counties to statewide occurrence. In northern parts of its range, turkey vultures make a southward migration. In fall, it passes through from late August to late November with a peak from mid-October to mid-November. Wintering turkey vultures are most abundant in southeastern counties. Pennsylvania's breeding population winters as far as southern Florida. The turkey vulture resides in eastern United States south to southern North America, Central America, and South America.

## turkey vulture

