

Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*

The Black Vulture soars on thermals to gain altitude and to cover large distances with little energy expenditure. In this manner the bird spends much of its day searching for food.

Black Vultures have a less well-developed sense of smell than Turkey Vultures and rely more on sight than smell to find carrion which may be why they usually soar at greater heights than Turkey Vultures.

Differences between Black and Turkey Vultures are simple: Black Vultures have black heads while Turkey Vultures have red heads. In the air, Black Vultures have short tails and light gray only at the wing tips while Turkey Vultures have longer tails and light gray all along the bottom of the wings.

One-on-one, a Black Vulture can be dominated by the slightly larger Turkey Vulture, but Black Vultures rarely travel alone, and a flock of aggressive Black Vultures will drive away the more solitary Turkey Vulture.

Black Vultures are highly social, forming flocks to forage and roosting in large aggregations. The large communal roosts give unsuccessful or inexperienced vultures a chance to follow others to carcasses.

Black Vultures feed mainly on carrion, although when particularly pressed for a meal, they will eat ripe or rotten fruit. They also scavenge fish and will fight savagely between themselves for food.

Occasionally, Black Vultures attack small live prey, which Turkey Vultures never do. The Black Vulture relies on others in their group to warn them about approaching danger while eating, which allows them to eat particularly quickly.



Because vultures are not true hunters, they have weaker legs and feet and duller talons and beaks than other raptors. Their feet are more adapted for running than for clutching.

Like most vultures, the Black Vulture is essentially silent. It lacks a syrinx — the vocal organ of birds — and its only vocalizations are grunts or low hisses. Usually the vultures are completely silent, only hissing or grunting when fighting over food source or during courtship.

The Black Vulture is monogamous and forms strong social bonds to its kin with family units consisting of immediate kin and extended relatives.

Black Vulture courtship involves a small group of males walking around females with wings spread partly and rapid head bobbing. Individual courtship activities involve chasing, flying high into the air, spiraling down, dancing on the ground, and bumping chests.

Black Vultures begin breeding around three years of age and they will breed every year. They begin nesting two weeks earlier than Turkey Vultures.

In the wild, Black Vultures live for an average of five years, but they have been observed to live as long as 21 years in captivity; the oldest wild banded bird was 16 years old.

The Black Vulture doesn't build a nest; instead, it lays its eggs on bare ground in isolated locations where there is little human disturbance.

The site may be a dark recess in a cave, abandoned building, thicket, pile of rocks, or even in a hollow log or tree. A pair of Black Vultures may check out the site's isolation by perching nearby for a period of weeks before beginning actual egg laying.

The female lays two eggs that are incubated by both parents for 38 - 45 days. The young vultures are ready to fledge when they are about three months old, but they stay with the parents in a social group for years.

NAME DERIVATION:

The scientific name comes from *korax*, the Greek word for raven; *gyps*, which means a vulture; and from the Latin word *atratus*, meaning to be clothed in black, as in mourning.