



Vultures

by Chuck Fergus

Vultures, also 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. 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 North America, including the endangered California condor. Pennsylvania has two species: the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) and the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*). The turkey vulture is by far the more common; it is found statewide, while the black vulture, more of a southern species, occasionally strays into southeastern Pennsylvania. Both are protected by game laws.

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) — The turkey vulture is the chief avian scavenger of the United States, consuming huge quantities of unsanitary and (to human sensibilities) offensive carrion from roads, fields and forests. Three subspecies inhabit North America: the eastern (found in Pennsylvania); western; and Mexican turkey vulture.

Adults are about 30 inches in length, with wingspans up to six 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 gently V. The birds rock and tilt on the air currents.

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 pink heads and necks; in young birds, these skin areas are blackish. The turkey vulture's 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 voice box, all they can do is hiss 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.

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,

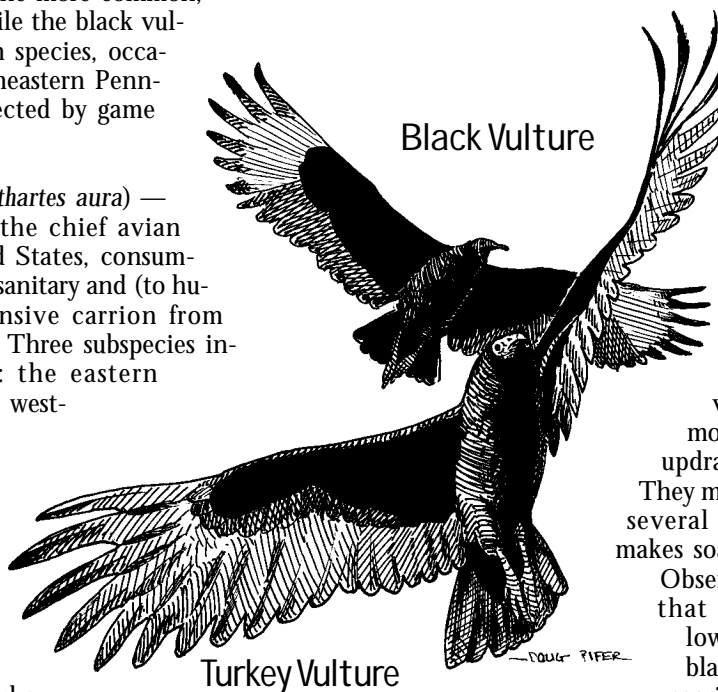
vultures migrate along mountain ridges, using thermal updrafts to help keep airborne.

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. This heightened soaring ability may have helped

the turkey vulture extend its range farther north than the black, which keeps more to the south, where the warmer sun generates abundant strong thermals.

Vultures eat all kinds of carrion, including fish, snakes, winter- and highway-killed mammals, domestic animals, and slaughterhouse refuse. Both captive and wild turkey vultures have been observed killing smaller birds.



Favored breeding habitat includes remote areas inaccessible to predators, such as caves, steep cliffs, hollow logs or stumps or dense thickets. (Unusual nesting sites: abandoned farm buildings; the snag of a dead tree with an entrance 14 feet above the nest; six feet below ground level in a rotted stump; and a cavity in a beech tree 40 feet above the ground.)

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 by 1¾ inches, 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. After 30 to 40 days, the eggs hatch into altricial young that remain in the nest for about four weeks. The young birds eat carrion regurgitated to them by their parents. Careful concealment or an inaccessible nest is important at this time, as the carrion's stench may attract potential predators.

Vultures are gregarious; groups of eight 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, from late winter or early spring until early fall.

The turkey vulture is a year-round resident of Pennsylvania. It is a common migrant in late February and March. In summer, it breeds throughout the state. In fall, it passes through during September and October, with stragglers into early November. *Cathartes aura* winters

in the southeastern counties (Adams, Berks, Bucks, Chester, Cumberland, Delaware, Franklin, Lancaster, Lehigh, Montgomery, Northampton, Philadelphia and York), and occasionally in the southwestern counties (Fayette and Greene). Most turkey vultures winter in the southern United States, Central America and South America.

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) — The black vulture, about 24 inches in length, with a wingspan less than five feet, is smaller than the turkey vulture. The black has a short tail and black 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 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.

The black vulture strays into, but is uncommon in, these southeastern Pennsylvania counties: Adams, Berks, Bucks, Chester, Cumberland, Franklin, Lancaster, Perry and York. It has nested in Adams and York counties.

Behavior, food, and nesting habits of the black vulture are similar to those of the turkey vulture. Eggs, usually two per clutch, are slightly larger than turkey vulture eggs, and are grayish-green, bluish-

white, or dull white, with brown blotches and spots. Incubation (by both sexes) takes 28 to 39 days. For unknown reasons, black vultures sometimes litter their nest areas with bright bits of trash, such as bottle caps and broken glass.



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Wildlife Notes are available from the
Pennsylvania Game Commission
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