

Carrion: It's What's for Dinner

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Two common—but often overlooked and underappreciated—birds call the Refuge home. If you look closely, you can usually spot two species of vultures at the Refuge—the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) and the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*).

Turkey Vultures

The scientific name for the turkey vulture is *Cathartes aura*. The genus name *Cathartes* comes from the Greek word *kathartes*, meaning “cleanser,” and is a reflection of the bird’s primary food source (carrion, i.e., dead animal carcasses) and its important work of clearing away the dead. The species name *aura* refers to the Mexican native name for turkey vulture, *aurouá*, which is derived from the Latin word *aureus*, meaning “golden.” The common name “turkey vulture” comes from the bird’s red head, which resembles the head of a wild turkey.

Turkey vultures are excellent at soaring on uprising air currents (i.e., thermals) and are often seen flying in mixed groups with other species. When soaring, turkey vultures hold their wings slightly raised, making a pronounced “V” or dihedral, and often have a wobbly or teetering flight with few wingbeats. Turkey vultures roost in large numbers. While roosting, they may be perched atop a limb or other structure, standing erect with wings outstretched sunning themselves. You may also spot them in small groups on the ground huddled around a dead animal.

Turkey vultures generally prefer open areas such as farmlands; mixed, open forests and woodlands; and rangelands. Turkey vultures have an excellent sense of smell that they use to find the carrion on which they feed. Turkey vultures may also be seen around landfills and trash dumps feeding on the refuse. Turkey vultures nest in sheltered areas such as rock crevices; caves; ledges; hollow trees; logs; large, abandoned nests (e.g., from a hawk or heron); or old, abandoned buildings. They do not build a typical nest like many birds but rather lay one to three eggs on debris or the flat bottom of the loosely arranged nest site. Turkey vultures are known to use the same nest site year after year.

Turkey vultures are generally silent and lack a voice box to make proper songs like other birds, but they can make hissing, clucking, and whining noises.

Black Vultures

The black vulture’s scientific name is *Coragyps atratus*. The genus name *Coragyps* comes from the merger of two Greek terms: *korax*, meaning “raven” or “crow,” and *gyps*, meaning “vulture.” The species name *atratus* comes from the Latin word *ater*, meaning “clothed in black.” The common name “black vulture” is pretty self-explanatory as these birds are entirely black (except for white patches on the underside of their wingtips).

Black vultures are similar to turkey vultures in many ways, but they do have differences. Similar to turkey vultures, black vultures lack



Black vulture nest with eggs (left) and chicks (right) in the old hay barn at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

a voice box and are limited to hissing, grunts, and barking sounds. Black vultures are also social and highly gregarious birds that are usually seen in groups, oftentimes mixed with turkey vultures. Black vultures are also scavengers but have a much weaker sense of smell compared to turkey vultures. Therefore, they often rely on turkey vultures to sniff out their meals for them.

Black vultures prefer both forested and open habitats. They can be found in the evenings roosting in large flocks in tall trees or manmade structures such as lattice towers along transmission lines. Nest sites are similar to those of turkey vultures and include dark cavities in caves, crevices, hollow trees, brush piles, and abandoned buildings. Black vultures lay one to three eggs directly on the ground, and breeding pairs will reuse a nest site for several years.

When soaring, black vultures fly with only a slight dihedral compared to turkey vultures. Black vultures are smaller than their turkey vulture relatives—they are more compact and have broad wings and a short tail—however, what they lack in size, they make up in spunk. Black vultures are aggressive and will often chase away turkey vultures at a carcass or other feeding site. Unlike their turkey vulture cousins, black vultures will sometimes attack live prey and have been known to kill skunks, opossums, other birds, turtles, and young livestock, including piglets, lambs, and calves.

While these two species may not have the most glorious jobs in the animal kingdom, they do have an important one. Their role of cleaning dead carcasses from the landscape is an important ecological function that helps reduce the spread of disease. So, the next time you are visiting the Refuge, keep your eyes to the sky, and you may spot a few of these vultures soaring high above. I hope you do, and I hope you can view them with much-deserved awe, understanding, and appreciation.