



Species Spotlight

Turkey and Black Vultures

Cathartes aura and Coragyps atratus

2018 | YEAR OF
THE BIRD 

2018 marks the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, considered by many to be the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, National Geographic, the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and BirdLife International are joining forces with more than 100 other organizations, including the National Park Service, and millions of people around the world to celebrate 2018 as the “Year of the Bird.” As part of this celebration, NETN’s Species Spotlight series will focus on a different bird species each month throughout the year.

I know, right? That ugly mug is unlikely to appear on the cover of Bird Fancy magazine any time soon. But the Black Vulture, along with its close relative the Turkey Vulture, provides the invaluable service of cleaning up our roadsides and forests of dead animal carcasses helping to stop the spread of diseases like rabies. A dirty job if there ever was one, yet these tireless sanitation workers have not even once been profiled by Mike Rowe.

Is it a TV or BV?

Both species occur in the Northeast, though the Turkey Vulture (TV) is more common and has been around a lot longer. Black Vultures (BV) are relative newcomers. Each have recovered nicely in numbers after decades of persecution and DDT use, and BV’s appear to be expanding their range further north each year. These are large birds: TV’s have an expansive 6 foot wingspan, with BV’s coming in at a slightly shorter 5 feet. When in search of a meal, both utilize warm up currents of air to be lifted high in the sky and can be seen swirling together in these “kettles”. They often glide to the next “thermal” with almost effortless efficiency, but BV’s do need to flap their shorter wings more frequently than TV’s.

Why the Long Face?

The heads of both Turkey and Black Vultures lack any feathers. This is an adaptation to allow the birds to more easily keep their heads clean of contamination. No small feat for an animal that makes it’s living poking it’s face into dead animals. Vultures are built for life as a scavenger. Acute eyesight helps the bird spot a potential meal from high up in the sky, perhaps laying eyes on a carcass as small as 3-ft long from as far as 4 miles away. Their powerful bills can make quick work of a tough hide.

Smell ya later

Unusual in the bird world, Turkey Vultures have a very keen sense of smell, able to detect dead animals as fresh as 12 hours old from more than a mile away. Even Vultures have standards though, and won’t typically dine on highly rotted animals. Black Vultures lack a highly developed sense of smell, relying instead on their

sharp eyesight and brute force to secure meals. Groups of them sometimes follow Turkey Vultures to a fresh carcass. They then gang-up on the often solitary TV, driving it away from the meal. As a result, in places where there are a lot of BV’s, TV’s may specialize in devouring smaller meals that they can quickly swallow before the BV’s can drive them away.

Anthrax with a Side of Botulism

Even though they like their meals relatively fresh, Vultures sometimes prefer for a little decay to have set in to make it easier to penetrate a carcass. It’s a good thing for them they possess the remarkable ability to metabolize bacteria that would most likely kill other would-be scavengers. Their gut contains special acids that can dissolve anthrax, botulism, salmonella, and cholera bacteria. They may even be utilizing strains related to flesh eating bacteria to help break down their meals more completely.





Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures look similar in flight, but there are some key differences. Turkey's have large white patches that run the entire length of their wings, longer tails, and a bright red head if you are close enough to see it. Black Vultures only have whitish patches near the tips of their wings, and their ash-grey heads and feet stand in contrast to the rest of their black feathers. Though more pronounced in Turkey's, both species employ a dihedral, or V-shaped, wing configuration when soaring, but Black Vultures need to flap their wings more often than Turkey's do.

What is This - a Wake or a Party?

Both, actually. In a somewhat morbid naming convention, when Vultures flock together on their nightly roosts, often in large dead trees, it is known as a "wake of vultures". Sometimes these roosts can reach several hundred birds. In some parts of the country they are becoming a nuisance and can cause property damage to nearby buildings. Black vultures have even been known to attack and kill young and vulnerable livestock.

Powerful laser pointers, blasts of loud sounds and light (pyrotechnic shells know as Screamer Sirens and Bird Bangers), and even the hanging of a dead vulture by its feet are all used to harass and discourage the birds from congregating en masse in some neighborhoods.

Dilophosauric Doppelganger?

Though he took a lot of heat for it at the time, in Jurassic Park Michael Crichton bestowed upon the Dilophosaurus dinosaur the ability to spit acidic venom at its prey or adversaries. There is zero evidence in the fossil record that this, or any dinosaur, possessed this ability, but perhaps Mr. Crichton took inspiration from Black Vultures? In another habit that does less to endear them to most people, BV's can essentially projectile vomit

on demand as a defense mechanism. A trait that almost seemed to all but delight John James Audubon (see quote). Though not venomous, this projectile is acidic and causes a burning sensation to the eyes of whatever creature is unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end.

Even Less A-pee-ling Behavior

If you're on the fence of Vulture fandom, this next trait isn't likely to sway you over to their side. Though it seems

uncomely to us, when a Vulture starts to get too warm, it will excrete down it's legs to cool off through an evaporative effect - a practice know as "urohydrolysis". This works in much the same way sweat cools us down on hot days, and since birds lack the ability to sweat or pant - they may as well...

For more information

- Watch a large roost of Black Vultures disperse into a kettle, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOiL5hMFm8c>.

- For info on NETN's long-term Breeding Landbird monitoring program see <https://www.nps.gov/im/netn/breeding-landbirds.htm>.

In cold and wet weather [Black Vultures] assemble round the chimney-tops, to receive the warmth imparted by the smoke. I never heard of their disgorging their food on such occasions, that being never done unless when they are feeding their young, or when suddenly alarmed or caught. In that case, they throw up the contents of their stomach with wonderful quickness and power.

- John James Audubon
Birds of America

