



Vultures

Misinformation has cloaked vultures in mystery and fear for generations; however, these fascinating animals have evolved a unique and impressive list of adaptations which contribute a great deal to our local ecosystem. There are two species of vultures that can be found in Rhode Island; most commonly the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) and, more rarely, the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*). As members of the Cathartidae family, both species are excellent scavengers that help keep our roads clean and our ecosystem healthy.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Vultures can be found in open woods, fields, farms, and around roadways. Over a million vultures from Western populations migrate annually to Central and South America. While migrating, they can travel up to 200 miles a day until they reach their wintering grounds, south of the U.S. border.



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Food Habits: Vultures are notorious scavengers, often feeding on carcasses left behind on roads as a result of car strikes. Unlike most other birds, turkey vultures have an excellent sense of smell and will travel for miles in search of food, often aggregating in large numbers, along with black vultures, around a carcass. Black vultures have been known to take

WHICH VULTURE IS WHICH?

The turkey vulture (above) has dark brown plumage with a naked reddish or pink head. In flight, turkey vultures hold their wings in a “V” (dihedral) shape, and tip side to side while gliding.

Wingspan: Up to 67 in

Length: 26 in

Weight: 4 lbs

Lifespan: ≤16 years

The aptly named black vulture (left) has black plumage with a naked, gray head. The wings are marked with silver/white tips. In flight, black vultures hold their wings in a flatter position with quicker wing beats. Tail appears shorter in flight.

Wingspan: Up to 68 in

Length: 59 in

Weight: 4.4 lbs

Lifespan: ≤25 years

live prey, such as skunks, opossums, fish and young livestock, but this is much less common in turkey vultures. Vultures have relatively weak feet compared to hawks and eagles, however, they have incredibly strong beaks which allow them to tear into their meal, sometimes working as a team to pull apart tougher carcasses.

Behavior: Vultures are active during the day and can be seen roosting in large numbers with wings spread early in the morning to gain heat. At night, vultures will roost with family units in trees or rock outcroppings in secluded areas. Large flocks of vultures can be observed during migration in northern populations but the southern populations tend to abstain from migrating.

Reproduction: Vultures nest in remote areas, away from humans. Their nests are not much more than a hole in a log, ledge of rock or scrape on the ground, but they will return yearly to a nesting location where they have previously been successful. Vultures mate for life and their courtship display consists of a follow flight where one individual will trail behind the other as they swoop and dive through the air. Average clutch size is between 1 and 3 eggs. Both parents care for their young and chicks will stay in the nest for about 2 to 3 months before fledging. Once they leave the nest, juveniles usually stay in a family group and continue visiting the roost site for up to 3 months before moving on to find new territory.

Disease: Vultures have an excellent immune system and cannot contract botulism, anthrax, cholera, or salmonella. Vultures help prevent the spread of disease by removing dead animals from the environment.

REGULATORY STATUS

Vultures are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-712) makes it illegal for anyone to harm or possess any migratory bird, or migratory bird body, or the parts (including feathers), active nests, eggs, or young.

LIVING WITH VULTURES

Once persecuted and trapped, vulture populations are now on the rise. However, the consistent threat to vultures lies in rodent poison; after the target animals (mice and rats) have perished, vultures will unknowingly consume the toxic meal. This has been a concern among populations of other birds of prey as well, including owls, hawks and eagles. They may not be the most “classically beautiful” bird found in Rhode Island, but they are a captivating and important part of our ecological community.

DID YOU KNOW?

- “New World vultures” of North and South America are not closely related to the “Old World vultures” of Africa, Asia and Europe, they are actually more closely related to storks.
- A group of vultures is called a committee, venue, or volt; a group in flight is called a kettle.
- Vultures will vomit, if threatened, to decrease their body weight and make an agile escape from predators.
- Vultures will urinate on their own legs to cool down.
- To prevent carrion from becoming affixed to and soiling their feathers, vultures lack feathers on their heads.

