

# Liberty Wildlife Rehabilitation Foundation



Liberty Wildlife

## Education Program's Natural History

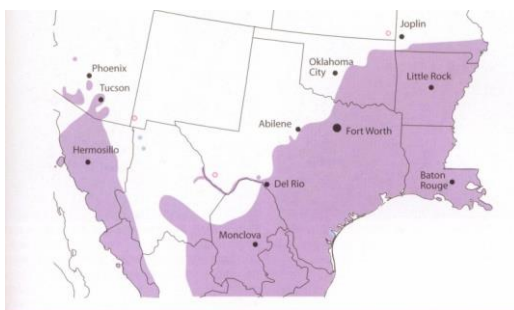


Black Vulture

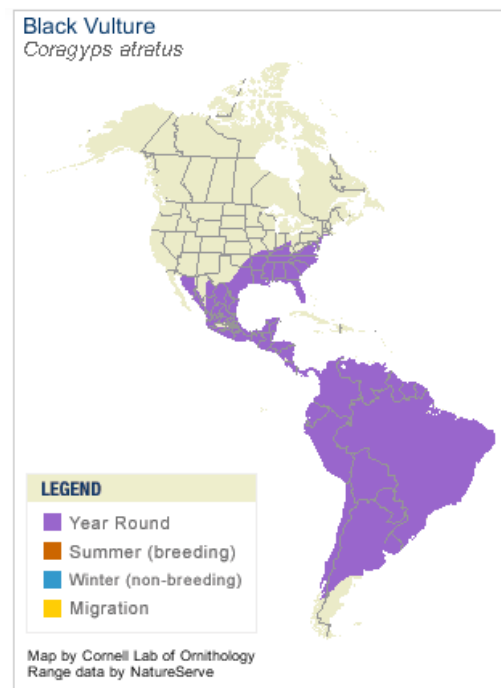


## Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*)

**Range:** Black Vultures are found in the southern and eastern United States and south into Central America and South America. In the United States, they can be found from Texas to New Jersey and are most numerous in the southeastern coastal states from South Carolina to Texas. Besides the coastal states, they have been found in Kansas, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. In Arizona, they are typically found south of Tucson (Cornell). Like the Turkey Vulture, the Black Vulture has been expanding its range northward since the 1930's, perhaps due to increased food availability and warmer climates. Although they are less migratory than the Turkey Vulture, many individuals will withdraw from the extreme northern ranges and travel south during the winter.



**BLACK VULTURE, *Coragyps atratus*:** Uncommon, local in AZ. Common in core range of U.S. and Mexico. Regularly disperses beyond mapped range in TX. Accidental in CA, CO, IA, KS, BC, and YK.



**Habitat:** The Black Vulture prefers an open habitat that is interspersed with stands of trees or brush such as lowlands along rivers, coastal plains, open fields, and deserts. The open range is ideal for searching for carcasses. The woodlands provide them with roosts and nesting areas. They like clean, fresh water for drinking and bathing (Wheeler). They are rarely found in dense forest and high elevations. In Central and South America, they are largely confined to areas near settlements of people. They have adjusted well to human development. It is suggested that prior to the European settlement of the Neotropical forest, Black Vultures were scarce and confined to open areas along waterways and lake shores (Cornell). With human development, garbage became more available.

**Description:** The Black Vulture's plumage is entirely black except for the whitish undersurface of the primary feathers. Its head and upper neck are grey or black and unfeathered with a black long hooked beak. The legs and feet are also bare and grey, although they may appear white



due to vulture's habit of urinating down its legs. It has a very short, square tail compared to the Turkey Vulture's. Unlike most raptors, the male and female are similar in size. The Black Vulture is between 23 and 28 inches in length and weighs between 3.5 and 5 pounds. Its wingspan measures between 4.5 and 5 feet. In flight, the Black Vulture holds its wings horizontally when soaring unlike the Turkey Vulture which holds its wings in a slight dihedral (v-shape). In addition, the Black Vulture tends to flap more often and rocks less from side to side.

On the ground, the Black Vulture will often use a hopping run with wings half open in addition to general walking.

Technically, the Black Vulture is voiceless, but may grunt or hiss. A low-toned *wuff* is emitted when alarmed. (Wheeler)



#### Turkey Vulture

- Long two-toned wings
- Long tail
- Holds wings in upward "v" shape when soaring
- Unsteady rocking flight
- Small red skinhead
- Seen throughout the park



#### Black Vulture

- Short, square tail
- All black with white wingtips
- Black skinhead
- Quick, labored wingbeats
- Usually seen near the river

**Hunting/Prey:** An aerial scavenger, the Black Vulture feeds primarily on wild and domestic carrion. Dead mammals ranging from mice to cattle are common foods. On rare occasions, the Black Vulture will attack and kill newborn pigs, lambs and calves by pecking out the eyes, usually as a group. (Wheeler) Additionally, it might catch and eat young herons, skunks, opossums and fish.

Unlike the Turkey Vulture, the Black Vulture does not have a well developed sense of smell. As a result it must rely upon its visual acuity or depend on other foragers or to locate food. To maximize this latter strategy, it will fly higher than the Turkey Vulture (Cornell). Soaring high on thermals, they rely on the Turkey Vulture to locate the carcass. Once it is located, the Black Vultures accumulate rapidly and displace the larger, less aggressive Turkey Vulture. Unlike the Turkey Vulture that is generally a solitary forager; the Black Vulture often will



forage as a group. Communal roosts play an important part in this foraging behavior. Studies have shown that these communal roosts provide information where food can be located. Roosting successful Black Vultures that located food on the previous day will return to it and new less unsuccessful Black Vultures that were unaware of this feeding site will follow from the roost.

At the carcass, the dominant adult Black Vultures can be highly aggressive to other sub-adults and juvenile Black Vultures. Usually, this aggression is directed toward non-kin individuals (Cornell). This aggression can also be seen at the communal roosts and is again directed towards non-kin individuals.

Black Vultures cannot open large carcasses on their own and must rely on larger scavengers to do so. Unopened carcasses are usually entered through the mouth, eyes or anus. Black Vultures feed quickly unlike the Turkey Vulture. Also unlike the Turkey Vulture, the Black Vulture does not use its feet when feeding.

**Breeding/Nesting:** The Black Vulture breeds once a year. In the southern range breeding may start as early as January. In the northern areas breeding will be from March to June, usually two weeks earlier than the Turkey Vulture. The pair is monogamous and maintains long-term pair bonds. No nest is built. Nesting sites include rock outcrops, fallen trees, cliffs, hollow logs and bushy habitat. The female lays between 1 and 3 (usually 2) greenish white with brown markings eggs which hatch in 38 to 45 days. Both sexes will incubate. The parents hold the eggs being incubated on top of their inner and central toes of both feet next to their warm bodies. Once hatched, the parents feed the young well digested regurgitated food. The young fledge in about 90 days, but the parents may feed their young for as many as eight months after fledging. This prolonged dependence of the young on their parents may be responsible, in part, for the strong social bonds that Black Vultures maintain throughout their lives (Cornell). The young may stay with the parents in a social group for years.

**Lifespan:** Black Vultures are generally long-lived with an average life span of 10 years in the wild. A banded Black Vulture lived to 25 years. (Cornell)

**Threats:** Some of the main threats are: Collision with vehicles and buildings, electrocution, poisoning meant for varmints, illegal shooting, and lead poisoning from ingested bullet fragments and pellets in carcasses of game animals not retrieved by hunters and leg traps.

#### **Other Black Vulture Facts:**

- The word "vulture" is derived from the Latin word *vultur*, meaning "tearer," and is a reference to its feeding habits.
- The Black Vulture's Latin name **Coragyps atratus** roughly translates into "raven-vulture clothed in black as in mourning" referring to the color of its plumage.
- Lacking a syrinx—the vocal organ of birds—the Black Vulture only vocalizations are grunts or low hisses.
- Because the Black Vulture does not kill its food, its feet and talon strength are not very strong. Similarly, it is not able to carry food in its feet.
- One on one, a Black Vulture can be dominated by the slightly larger Turkey Vulture. But Black Vultures rarely travel alone. Flocks of Black Vultures will take over quickly a carcass and drive the more solitary Turkey Vultures away.



- The Black Vulture has a heavier wing load (shorter wings so less surface area for the weight) than the Turkey Vulture, requiring stronger thermals for soaring, so they usually become active an hour or more after Turkey Vultures.
- The Black Vulture is one of the 7 New World Vultures. Three of the New World Vultures can be found in the United States: the Turkey Vulture, the Black Vulture and the California condor.
- While the New World Vultures have many resemblances to Old World Vultures, the exact taxonomic placement of New World Vultures remains unclear. Though both New World and Old World Vultures are similar in appearance and have similar ecological roles, they are not very closely related, having evolved from different ancestors in different parts of the world. Their exact taxonomy is currently under debate, with some earlier authorities suggesting that the New World vultures are more closely related to storks. More recent authorities prefer to retain their current placement in the order Falconiformes along with the Old World Vultures or to place them in their own order, Cathartiformes.
- The Black Vulture commonly will preen mates, parents, offsprings and siblings. Typically this will occur at the roost, but also will occur at carcasses. Allopreening probably strengthens social bonds between individuals Black Vultures.
- Although Black Vultures have few natural predators, when threatened they will regurgitate semi-digested food which deters most predators due to the smell.
- New World vultures, including the Black Vulture, have the unusual habit of excreting on their legs for evaporative cooling, called of urohydrosis. As this behavior is also present in storks, it is one of the arguments for a close relationship between the two groups. Sibley and Ahlquist (1991) Sibley, Charles G., and Jon E. Ahlquist (1991) *Phylogeny and Classification of Birds: A Study in Molecular Evolution*. Yale University Press.
- The head and neck of New World Vultures are featherless as an adaptation for hygiene; there is an important purpose to the vulture's bald head. When the vulture is eating carrion, it often sticks its head inside the carcass to reach the meat. A feathery head would capture unwanted pieces of the vulture's meal, along with all the bacteria it hosts. After mealtime, the vulture perches in the heat of the sun and whatever prey pieces cling to the fuzz on their head will bake off. The Vulture Society; Stone, Lynn M. (1992) *Vultures* Rourke Publishing Group.
- While the Black Vulture is sometimes referred to as a “Buzzard,” this term generally refers to Old World Buteos or hawks.
- At night, Black Vultures will often roosts in the same tree. These communal roosts sometimes will contain hundreds of birds.
- The Black Vulture will conserve energy at night by reducing its body temperature. In the morning, it will warm up by spreading its wings toward the sun.
- The seven New World vultures are:
  - Black Vulture in South America and north to US
  - Turkey Vulture throughout the Americas to southern Canada
  - Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture in South America and north to Mexico
  - Greater Yellow-headed Vulture in the Amazon Basin of tropical South America
  - California condor in California. Formerly widespread in the mountains of western North America.
  - Andean Condor in the Andes
  - King Vulture from Southern Mexico to northern Argentina





## Armadillo

Armadillo was transferred from the World Bird Sanctuary in Missouri to Liberty Wildlife in 2004 as an adult bird. His actual age, gender, and reason for being at that facility are unknown. There are two possibilities. He may have arrived at the World Bird Sanctuary as an imprint. The other possibility is that he was captive bred at the Sanctuary. In either case, he is non-releasable. Following his arrival, Army, as he is called, was very hesitant to work with his handlers. With patient training, he has become a welcomed addition to Liberty's education program. Army is also being trained to fly from handler to handler in Liberty's flighted program where he can demonstrate this ability at events and schools.



## Gaicho (no photo available)

In January 2014, a Liberty volunteer was dispatched to a Phoenix home to rescue a large black bird that had been living in the caller's back yard for over a month. The volunteer identified the bird as a juvenile Black Vulture that behaved quite at home there and would not leave. Once at Liberty, the medical team's examination found that the vulture had no injuries, excepting his lack of fear of people. Now determined to be an imprint and non-releasable, he was appropriately named "Gaicho" and following the completion of the necessary paperwork, assigned to his new tasks as an educator.

Compiled by Max Bessler

Sources: Cornell Lab of Ornithology "Birds of North America On-Line," Cornell Lab of Ornithology "All About Birds," The Peregrine Fund, University of Michigan "Museum of Zoology," The Carolina Raptor Center, [Raptors of Western North America](#) by Brian K. Wheeler

