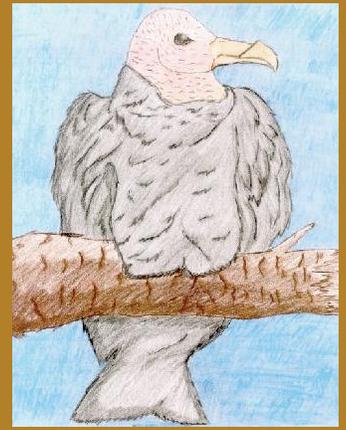


# Vultures

## Order Ciconiiformes

### Family Cathartidae

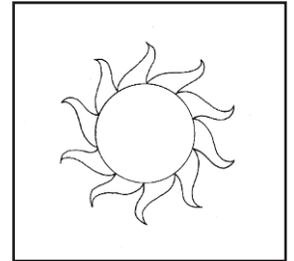


**Vultures are probably the most common large bird we see soaring aloft in lazy circles above Pennsylvania.** They are easily distinguished from other birds of prey by their more pronounced V-shaped flight silhouettes. In flight, vultures appear to tilt back and forth as though balancing on a tightrope, especially the turkey vulture.

**Sometimes called buzzards, vultures are large, dark birds with featherless heads.** This enables them to eat rotting carrion in a more sanitary manner. When a vulture is feeding on a dead animal, it will often stick its head inside the carcass. The lack of plumage help it stay relatively clean and parasite free.

**They are diurnal birds** that need the sun to create thermals so they can soar on the updrafts in search of food. Since their food does not move, **vultures use their sense of smell to locate decomposing prey**, though the black vulture probably finds its food by following the turkey vultures since turkey vultures are one of the few birds with a well-developed sense of smell.

**Vultures are also social birds**, sometimes living in groups of up to 25 adults and juveniles. Although their talons and beaks are weak compared to a hawk or eagle, vultures are still considered birds of prey and share that group's characteristic large wingspan built for soaring.



**Turkey Vulture**  
*Cathartes aura*

Both turkey and black vultures are found in our state, but **turkey vultures far outnumber black vultures.** Adult turkey vultures have wingspans up to six feet across.

In flight, their bodies are almost completely dark except for the **grayish outer wing feathers** (the primary and secondary feathers).

**Adults have a red naked head and red legs and feet.** The immature turkey vultures have a *black head* and red legs and feet. Some people confuse the young birds with black vultures, but black vultures have black heads, legs and feet.



**Vultures** will hiss or grunt, but they cannot sing because they **lack a syrinx or voice box**. Like all birds of prey, their large wingspan enables them to soar for great periods of time without exerting much energy. However, if the weather is poor they need to roost until it improves so they can take advantage of the sun-heated thermals. **When resting, they will often hold their wings out to sun themselves.**

Both vultures are **secretive nesters**, using remote **areas like caves**, atop cliffs, in hollow logs or tree snags after mating in summer. The **isolated sites probably help avoid drawing predators to their foul-smelling food, which the adults regurgitate for the young**. No actual nest is built. One to three creamy colored eggs are placed on gravel or woodchips. Both parents incubate the eggs, which hatch a bit after one month.

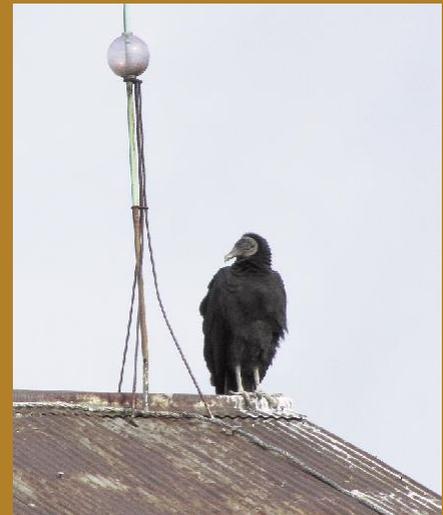
**Black Vultures are smaller than turkey vultures** with a wingspan of about five feet. They have whitish primary feathers visible on their wingtips when in flight. Their tail is shorter, too, and if you look closely at a flying black vulture, you can see **its feet trailing beyond the tail**.

**Adults and immature birds have black featherless heads, black legs and feet.** Black vultures cannot soar quite as well as turkey vultures and flap their wings quite a bit while soaring. Turkey vultures soar almost constantly when in flight.

Both birds often travel together. This probably helps the black vultures find food since **they do not have a developed sense of smell like their close cousins.**

The black vulture's bluish-green eggs are just a bit larger than the turkey vulture's. **Black vultures like to collect small "treasures,"** like glass or buttons, to deposit in their nests which are found in sites similar to the turkey vulture.

One of the most haunting scenes at Pennsylvania's famous **Gettysburg National Military Park** involves **the ghostly roosts of vultures that settle each evening** over the now serene battlefield and cemetery. The three-day bloody battle during July 1863 left **thousands of dead soldiers and horses strewn across the grounds in sweltering summer heat**. Men were hastily buried, but it was an overwhelming task in the midst of a national war. Over time, many Confederate soldiers' bodies were exhumed and sent to relatives in southern states. Many Union soldiers were unearthed and reburied in the new National Cemetery on site, where Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg Address. Most horses were never buried. It is said **the odor of decomposition from the horses and the constant unearthing of dead men** lasted for several years. The vultures undoubtedly had a field day. Today nearly 1,000 vultures still gather and remain a constant reminder of the death and devastation of our nation's Civil War.



**Black Vulture**  
*Coragyps atratus*



## A Simple Review of Vultures



**Most people consider vultures birds of prey**, and they do share many physical characteristics with birds of prey. We have grouped the birds in this book into the same Orders found in the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds*. **In this book vultures are found under the same Order—Ciconiiformes—as herons and related birds.** Other sources list vultures under the Order Accipitriformes, with eagles and harriers and such. We had to make a decision, and we went with a familiar and trusted source.

**A group of vultures is sometimes called a “committee” of vultures.** If you have ever seen a barren tree filled with roosting vultures, you do get the impression they are discussing something important.

**Vultures have large wingspans allowing them to soar** for long periods of time during the day **on thermals**, rising columns of warm air. This allows them to save energy while searching for food. They are **carion eaters**. **Turkey vultures**, which are more common in Pennsylvania than black vultures, are perhaps the **only bird that has a sense of smell**. They are attracted to the smell of a gas called mercaptan. That gas comes from decomposing animals. Black vultures use their sense of sight and probably find their food by following turkey vultures.

**Their featherless heads keep them relatively clean** while they feed on the decaying bodies of their prey. They have really good immune systems that protect them while eating food that would make most other creatures very sick.

**When a vulture gets too hot, it will defecate on its own legs to cool down.** Yep—that means it poops on itself. **If an intruder gets too close, a vulture will throw up** on whatever is threatening it. Considering what a vulture eats, that should keep most predators away from it. Even though they have less than appetizing habits, they really are neat birds.

**Vultures** don't have any calls or songs, but they do **hiss** on occasion.