

# Vultures

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>  
Researched-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.  
Your source for animal handling, control methods, and wildlife species information.



**Figure 1a. Turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Note the red head. Photo by US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)-Pacific Southwest Region.**



**Figure 1b. Black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*). Note the black head. Photo by Ken Thomas.**

## Species Overview

### Conflicts

Roost sites can include dozens to hundreds of vultures. The associated accumulation of feces can be unsightly and odorous. Vultures damage homes and other buildings by tearing at caulking, seals, roof liners, and covers. They occasionally scratch and defecate on vehicles. Black vultures may attack and kill calves, lambs, and piglets. Vultures pose a significant threat to human safety when they soar near aircraft routes.

### Legal Status

Vultures are federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, administered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). A permit is required to trap, kill, relocate, or otherwise handle vultures or their eggs. Federal and state permit applications are available from USDA-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)-Wildlife Services (WS). Permit applications are processed by the USFWS. Permits require evidence that non-lethal methods have failed to work. The USDA-WS offers technical and operational assistance to the public and other government agencies.

### Identification

Two species of vultures occur in North America. Turkey vultures (*Cathartes aura*, Figure 1a) are larger than black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*, Figure 1b). Both are scavengers and play an important role in removing carrion from the environment.

## Physical Description

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Turkey vultures are dark brown-black with a featherless, bright red head (adult) or brown head (juvenile), and a relatively long, narrow tail. The undersides of the wings are gray, except along the leading edges, which are black. Wing span averages 67 inches. Turkey vultures weigh about 4 pounds and may live up to 16 years.

Black vultures are predominantly black, with a dark gray to black head (juvenile and adult). The tail is shorter and wider than a turkey vulture's. The undersides of the wings are dark gray with large white patches near the wing tips. Wing span averages 59 inches. Black vultures weigh about 4 pounds and may live up to 25 years.

## Species Range

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Turkey vultures have become increasingly abundant throughout the Northeast US. Range of the black vulture is centered in the Southeast US, although they have extended their range northward into Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania during the past 50 years.

## Health and Safety Concerns

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Concentrations of vultures can be hazardous to aircraft, especially when sanitary landfills are near flight paths at airports. Turkey vultures may carry salmonella and other bacteria in their stomachs. Vultures do not spread anthrax, hog cholera, or avian influenza. Public water supplies have been contaminated with fecal coliform bacteria due to droppings of vultures in water towers, springs, and other water sources.

## General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

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### Reproduction

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North American vultures typically reach sexual maturity in 3 to 5 years. Both species usually lay

two eggs per clutch and one clutch per year. Eggs hatch in about 40 days. Both adults take care of young for about three months. Black vultures mate in thinly wooded areas with thickets. Vultures keep the same mate each breeding season unless one of the pair dies.

### Nesting/Denning Cover

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Vultures do not build nests, but lay their eggs in dense thickets, hollow logs, caves, abandoned buildings, and on rock ledges. Turkey vultures often nest in abandoned barns and warehouses.

### Behavior

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Vultures congregate in large communal roosts, typically located in wooded hollows or ravines with drainage into lakes or rivers. Occasionally, vultures roost in backyard trees, on billboards, suburban rooftops, and on water, electrical, radio, and microwave towers. Roosts are used throughout the year but have the largest numbers of vultures during the late autumn through early spring. Roosts are dynamic and vultures may use different roost sites each night. Turkey vultures and black vultures may roost together. Turkey vultures migrate north in spring and south in fall. Black vultures tend to remain in the southern portion of the US.

### Habitat

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Turkey vultures can be found in almost any habitat, from coasts to deserts to plains. Turkey vultures especially are adapted to forage in wooded areas. Both species thrive in areas with open fields.

### Food Habits

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Vultures are scavengers. They feed on carrion such as road kill and the remains of animals left by predators. Vultures have keen eyesight that they use to locate food. Turkey vultures can find food by smell, but black vultures lack a well-developed sense of smell. Vultures have strong bills for pulling and tearing but relatively weak feet, so they cannot lift or carry much weight. Although vultures occasionally prey on

domestic fowl and livestock, they primarily feed on carrion and specialize in scavenging carcasses. They may kill and consume vulnerable newborn livestock in open pastures.

### Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

Vultures hiss and grunt. The ground beneath nests and roost sites typically is covered by odorous feces and “whitewash.”

### Damage Identification

#### Damage to Landscapes

The volume of excrement and accompanying odor beneath roosts are the primary issues related to the impact of vultures on landscapes.

#### Damage to Crops and Livestock

Vultures may attack young and vulnerable livestock, especially lambs and kids. Typical attacks are directed toward the eyes of the animal, followed by pecking at the rectum, genitals, and nose. Black vultures may pluck the eyes and eat the tongues of newborn, downed, or sick livestock; disembowel young livestock; kill and feed on domestic fowl; and cause flesh wounds from bites. Attacks during birthing also have occurred. Vultures are attracted to afterbirth.

#### Damage to Structures

Damage to property by vultures includes tearing and sometimes consuming asphalt shingles and rubber roofing material; rubber, vinyl, or leather upholstery in cars, boats, tractors, and other vehicles; latex window caulking; and plastic flowers at cemeteries. Most damage of this type is attributed to black vultures, although turkey vultures have been implicated in some situations.

### Damage Prevention and Control Methods

The best approach to the control of vultures is to consider and apply several safe, effective, legal, and practical techniques and methods. An integrated program for damage management for vultures may include habitat management, harassment, and management of the population.

#### Habitat Modification

Disrupt roost sites located in woodlots by removing roost trees and branches. Remove garbage or place it in enclosed containers. Vultures are attracted to carcasses as a food source, so remove carcasses and dispose of them by deep burial. Bring livestock closer to buildings for birthing to reduce the risk of predation on young animals by black vultures.

#### Exclusion

Exclude vultures from rooftops, overhangs, and other structures by the use of nets. Install bird spikes, lines, and electrical shock tape to exclude vultures from ledges.

#### Frightening Devices

Disperse vulture roosts by deploying pyrotechnics (bird bangers, bird screamers, and shell crackers) in a systematic manner. Timing, persistence, and diversity are critical for effective roost dispersal. Shoot pyrotechnics into the roost at dusk as birds are entering or flying around the site. Be prepared to disperse the roost every evening for up to 4 days in a row until the birds do not return. Use a variety of pyrotechnics and stop shooting 30 minutes after dusk to reduce any acclimation by the birds.

Red lasers are effective for dispersing vultures out of roosts at night. Approach within ¼ mile and “paint” the roost site with a laser. Continue until all of the birds have dispersed. Repeat the method every night for up to 4 nights until the birds do not return. Follow all safety

instructions when using lasers. Make special efforts to avoid shining lasers at aircraft.

Hang dead vultures or effigies of vultures from structures such as towers, bridges, and other structures to disperse vultures from loafing and roosting sites. A permit is required to possess and use a preserved vulture as an effigy. Mylar® scary-eye balloons and Mylar® tape also may frighten vultures from an area.

### Repellents

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None are available to repel vultures.

### Toxicants

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None are registered for use on vultures.

### Shooting

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Before utilizing any lethal techniques, acquire the appropriate permits through the USFWS as vultures are federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treat Act.

Use shotguns with No. 4 shot or .223-caliber rifles or larger to shoot vultures. Vultures have keen eyesight and learn quickly, so it is difficult to reduce populations of vultures by shooting. Shooting may help reinforce the effectiveness of other frightening devices.

### Trapping

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Federal permits are required for trapping vultures. Contact the nearest USFWS regional office.

Walk-in traps can be used to capture groups of vultures and pole traps can be used to capture individual birds in areas where they are causing problems. State and federal permits are required for trapping vultures.

### Other Methods

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Rocket- or cannon-fired nets can be effective for capturing vultures. Special licenses are needed to transport net charges. Nets fired by compressed air are effective also.

## Disposition

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### Relocation

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Relocation of vultures is not recommended except in situations involving a rescue.

### Translocation

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The home range of vultures can be greater than a 9-mile radius, and some birds have migratory behavior, so vultures should be transported at least 100 miles and in the appropriate direction for the season. Birds should be tagged to determine if they return to the site of capture. Translocation usually is feasible only in situations involving airports, and requires federal and state permits.

### Euthanasia

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Carbon dioxide is a suitable form of euthanasia for vultures.

## Web Resources

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<http://dnr.sc.gov>

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

[http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife\\_damage/index.shtml](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/index.shtml)

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