

The smellier the better!

By Martin Hagne

Vultures are big, smelly, and they eat dead animals! They might not be the prettiest of birds... some might even say they're ugly. But they are some of the most important animals in the ecosystem! Vultures are what clean up after the rest of nature. They can make a carcass of another animal disappear in no time.

Some people call them "buzzards." This is a name they received from the first English settlers who thought they looked like the European hawks called buzzards. But while vultures and hawks are both part of the raptor family, vultures are vultures, not hawks.

There are only two species of vultures in Texas today, but that was not always true. Besides the common Turkey Vulture and Black Vulture we see almost daily, at some point in history, Texas skies also saw California Condors soaring in search of food. Reach even further back, and there is a mystery vulture whose wing span was even larger than the condors! Fossil skeleton records from caves have shown that both of these species lived here. California Condors have an impressive nine foot wing span... but the ancient bird, thought to be a vulture species, was up to 14 feet across!

Our local cleanup crew is now made up of the Turkey Vulture, with its featherless red head, and its smaller cousin the Black Vulture, with an equally featherless head that stays black. Besides the different colored heads, they can be told apart in flight by the Black's shorter tail and shorter rounder wings that have a "silver" appearance at the wing tip. The Turkey has silver in the wing as well, but it's on the whole trailing edge of the wing, not just the tip. Turkey Vultures also fly with their wings in a dihedral, a slight V shape, often rocking back and forth. Be cautious, as you can't always judge by head color as the young Turkeys have black heads until close to adulthood.

Both vultures eat carrion, and the riper the better, it seems. Odor helps the Turkey Vulture find its food, as they "hunt" by smell and can smell something dead from a long way away. The Black Vulture finds its food by sight, and will often cheat by keying in on the Turkeys circling over a dead animal... just follow the guys that can smell the good stuff!

There is a distinct pecking order that can be seen at a carcass. Turkeys go in first, maybe because they can better start the process with more powerful beaks, etc. If a Crested Caracara joins the fray they wait their turn after the Black Vultures. Caracaras are not vultures (nor eagles) and are more closely related to falcons, but they do eat a lot of carrion.

One fun fact about Black Vultures is that they release excrement on their legs and feet to keep them cool! That is what gives their legs that nice white appearance. Be thankful these big guys are around though! Without them we'd have a much smellier world!