

That Wasn't a Buzzard You Saw!

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Have you seen a buzzard lately? Many people will probably answer yes to this question. But in fact they would be wrong unless they've been to Europe. Buzzards are strictly Old World species (Europe, Africa, and Asia) and include birds such as the Common Buzzard, the Long-legged Buzzard, and the European Honey-Buzzard. It is a common mistake to call the big black birds we see soaring overhead just about every day in Texas buzzards but they are actually vultures. In North America we have three species, the Turkey Vulture, the Black Vulture, and the California Condor but there are 22 species of vultures worldwide.

Here in Texas, we only have Turkey and Black Vultures. You can tell them apart in a couple of different ways. First, Turkey Vultures have a red head and Black Vultures have a black head, but beware the young Turkey Vulture which has a black head too! The head color is due to bare skin, not feathers, as vultures have featherless heads. This is also where both birds get their names.

It's a bit hard to see their heads when they are soaring so fortunately there is another easier way to tell them apart. Their wings are not only different in shape but they also have different coloration. Turkey Vultures have silvery white along the entire back half of the wing while Black Vultures only have that silvery white color near the wing tips. Next time you see a "buzzard" soaring, look and see if you can tell the difference. Turkey Vultures are more common but there are plenty of Black Vultures around too. It also very common to see Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks soaring with the vultures.

Vultures have many habits that humans find pretty yucky. For one thing, their diet consists mostly of dead animals, but this is a critical component of our environment. Think what would happen if nothing was eating all those dead carcasses. We need them to clean up that dead stuff! Their diet is the reason their heads are featherless. They frequently have to stick their head inside a carcass to get to the tasty bits and feathers would pick up debris and the associated bacteria. Another thing that is pretty yucky is their defense mechanism of regurgitating their last meal. That would certainly keep me away! Don't even think about the smell.

Both Black and Turkey Vultures have excellent eyesight to help them locate food, but Turkey Vultures also have a keen sense of smell. Black Vultures will actually soar higher than Turkey Vultures so they can keep an eye on them. When the Turkey Vultures discover a kill, the Black Vultures will follow them and share the bounty. Vultures often form large communal roosts which serve as a sort of information center where unsuccessful foragers can join a successful foraging group or gain information about the location of food.

Vultures are much maligned and have often been associated with death because they are black and eat carrion, but the vultures are really just helping us clean up. So remember, there are no buzzards in Texas, just our friendly carrion-eating vultures serving an important recycling function.

Photo by Sue Heat. Caption: Turkey Vultures have a red head and Black Vultures have a black head.