

## Vultures: Man's True Best Friend

Article By: Taylor Snyder

The New World vulture family consists of seven different species of vultures— three of which most Texans are likely familiar with. These include, Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*), and the distant conservation success icons, California Condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*). Regardless of which species they are, vultures have always had a bad reputation. It probably has something to do with most of them having bald or almost bald heads, but most definitely has to do with the ecological role that they fill as scavengers.

While it isn't the most glamorous position, scavengers play an important role in the food web. By feeding on carrion, or dead animals, these birds do us a huge favor—not only by improving ecosystem aesthetics (fewer dead animals laying around) but also by limiting the number of dangerous pathogens that could pass to humans. In fact, vultures have iron stomachs with incredibly strong stomach acids that are capable of killing anthrax, botulism, rabies, and other pathogens. By consuming carcasses that are infected with these diseases, these birds reduce the risk of disease transmission, including into soil and water.

Vultures actually have a lot of amazing adaptations that make them very good at what they do. For instance, their featherless or near-featherless heads help prevent gunk from sticking to them while they're feeding. Turkey Vultures, in particular, are unique in their own way as they possess an incredibly strong sense of smell which allows them to detect and seek out common chemical odorants emitted from carrion. Additionally, other species of vultures—like many species of birds of prey—rely on their incredible eyesight to locate dead animals or other clues, such as other scavengers, which could indicate that dinner is nearby.

You may have had the opportunity to watch a vulture sunbathe, and maybe wondered if they had more in common with your family cat than you realized. While they may just enjoy sunning themselves, some believe that they have other motives, like harnessing the sun's energy to kill pathogens, parasites, and remove any gunk that may have been left over after their meals.

If you need any more reasons to dispel any preconceived notions about these birds, they also need our help to look out for them—which is a great reason to love them. Old World vultures,

which include beautiful species such as the Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) and the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), are an unfortunate example of how imperiled these essential birds can become. Since they rely on dead animals to survive and have an unfortunate reputation, they are very vulnerable to both accidental and intentional poisoning. The majority of Old World vultures are teetering towards extinction for this reason, and New World vultures could head that way as well due to the consumption of lead and other poisons found in their food. So, please keep in mind how wide-reaching our choices can be and how many creatures they can impact for the worse. And, as always, show vultures some love (from a distance)!

Photo by Mike Williams

Caption: Black Vultures can often be seen sunning themselves, spiraling overhead, or enjoying a meal on the side of the road.