

Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures

Do you know how Carencro got its name? If you're a Cajun bird watcher you should know.

The old world name for a hawk was buzzard. In Cajun French, the word for 'buzzard' means 'carrion crow.' The legend is that this little town got its name before the Civil War because a large flock of black buzzards had come to the Vermilion River to feast on a fish kill.

At Palmetto Island State Park, vultures are best seen in the winter, because the foliage is less dense. The park is home to two types of vultures: the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture. Most of the time they are just sitting in a tall dead tree. Did you know that vulture droppings can harm trees and plants? I can't help but wonder if they choose the tree before it began to die and contributed to its demise or if they just prefer bare trees.

Black Vultures - Their Scientific name *Coragyps atratus* means '*Vulture dressed in black*'. They have jet-black feathers; featherless, **grayish-black wrinkled heads and necks**; short tails; and hooked beaks. When in the air, its **silvery or whitish wingtips** can be seen. They have a wing span of about 4.9 feet. **Turkey Vultures** - Their scientific name *Cathartes aura* means '*golden purifier*'. They have brownish-black feathers, **red featherless heads and necks** and ivory colored beaks. From the ground, you will see the **silver or white flight feathers, from body to tip**. Turkey Vultures can have a wing span of 6 feet.



If you venture outside of the park into the neighboring communities, you'll see these birds in action, often soaring with hawks. Black and Turkey Vultures have an interesting relationship. The Black Vulture has great eyesight but can't smell real good. The Turkey Vulture is just the opposite. The Blacks ride the thermals and watch the lower-flying Turkey Vultures. When the Turkey Vultures smells the rising gases of a decaying carcass and go for it, the Blacks follow, often in a group to chase the larger Turkey Vultures away.

The thought of vultures isn't very appealing to most people, but they are very important. Imagine them as nature's free waste management system. They keep our road ways and fields clean of dead carcasses.

Below are a few more bits of useless information that I thought was interesting about these vultures:

- They can soar for hours without flapping its wings when in search of their next meal. Contrary to old beliefs, it's not usually a human. There are stories of them taking newborn baby calves and lambs.
- Without a voice box they just make raspy hisses and grunts. You won't hear them singing and tweeting like other birds.
- Considered a threat to the safety of air traffic. Vultures and airplanes use the same air column.
- Black Vultures are monogamous and have strong social bonds with their families throughout their lives. They feed their young for up to eight months after fledging and are territorial over their roosting sites or food sources. They aggressively keep non-relatives away by pecking, biting, and wing-pummeling.
- Turkey Vultures are more solitary. They usually hunt alone or in a small group. Black Vultures hunt in large family groups and will easily steal a carcass from Turkey Vultures.
- Naked heads and necks are best for staying clean when poking around the inside of a carcass. Fresh kill or a putrid mess, these birds have excellent resistance to the toxins and bacteria the decaying meal.
- They are known to regurgitate their last meal when disturbed. Predators don't like it and it decreases takeoff weight for an easier escape.
- They use a process known as uridrosis. Yep, they poop on their legs. Experts say it helps them cool off.
- In the morning, before the air warms enough to soar, you might see them waiting for the sun with wings spread open. This posture is thought to help dry the wings, warm the body, and bake off bacteria.
- In 1918 they gained protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In the US it is illegal to take, kill, or possess turkey vultures, their eggs, and any body parts including but not limited to their feathers; violation of the law is punishable by a fine of up to \$100,000 for individuals or \$200,000 for organizations, and/or a prison term of 1 year.
- They are often killed by automobile collision.

I'd like to thank Wikipedia, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, TrecOhio.com, Ted Andrews, Country Roads Magazine and the LSU Ag Center for helping learn more about nature's waste management specialist.