
Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

Class: *Aves*

Order: *Cathartiformes*

Family: *Cathartidae*

Characteristics:

Except for the grey primary and secondary feathers, the turkey vulture is covered in black plumage. The head and neck are featherless with the skin being either a light pink or red. The nasal cavity is not divided by a septum, allowing for a viewer to look into one nostril and out the other side. The wing span to body mass ratio suggests that they can fly and glide with less energy cost when compared to other vultures ([Wallace 2004](#)).

Behavior:

To cool themselves, they will perform urohydrolysis (they will urinate on their legs which evaporates, cooling the legs) ([Arad et al 1988](#)). Turkey vultures have weak beaks, suggesting that they would prefer softer, decaying flesh. They can sense this decaying flesh via their highly developed sense of smell ([Houston 1986](#)). As a defense mechanism against predators or annoying animals, Turkey Vultures can vomit their food up to ten feet ([Nature Mapping Foundation](#)).

Reproduction:

Lays 1 to 3 eggs on the ground once a year. Unlike other birds, they are born without downy feathers, but will develop them later. The parents will feed them by regurgitation. The chicks will fledge after two to three months ([Howell and Webb 1995](#)).

Diet:

Wild: Anything dead, eggs, fruit, vegetables and refuse.

Zoo: Mice, special bird of prey diet and fleshy bones.

Conservation:

The species population is considered stable, possibly because of laws prohibiting the destruction of these birds.

FYI:

- There are four to six debated subspecies of turkey vulture (three in the US and Mexico and three in Central and South America), ([Palmer 1988](#)).
- Black Vultures can't smell very well so they will follow turkey vultures to kills.
- Turkey vultures are lured in to dead animals via the release of ethyl mercaptan.



Range & Habitat:

Forests and open areas



■ = year round range

■ = Breeding range

Lifespan: up to 33 years in captivity, 16.83 years in the wild.

Special Adaptations:

Featherless head; immune to many diseases

IUCN Conservation Status:

Least Concern

