

Vultures are disgusting! They have bald, wrinkly heads. What little voice they have is not unlike that of a flushing toilet. Most of all, they live off of dead meat. You've likely seen a group of them squabbling over a putrid roadkill. Film clips from African safaris show them hopping into a rotting carcass and emerging with a bloody scrap of meat. Circling vultures in the old Western movies meant a dead, or soon to be dead, cowboy. The picture of the Black Vulture above shows that even its flock-mates had little respect for it. Yuck!

But, could it be that vultures get a bad rap? One of our members had a dead armadillo near his back porch. It didn't take long before said armadillo began to stink. What does one do with a rotting armadillo? Holding your nose and scraping it into a garbage bag might work if the trash pickup is near but in this case it was nearly a week away. Wait for dark and drag him to the neighbors? Bury him? Not when it takes a half day with a pick axe just to plant a few holes for daffodil bulbs. Before a satisfactory solution was found vultures fortunately found the carcass and cleared it of all rotting meat in less than a day. A coyote or fox eventually dragged off what remained.

Citified Americans take garbage disposal for granted. Other than rolling it to the curb once a week, or maybe taking a few minutes to sort out the recyclables, garbage gets little thought. However, whether our trash eventually ends up in a landfill, an incinerator or is dumped in the ocean, as New York City used to do, nature in the end deals with all refuse. This is where vultures come, should we say fly, in.

Vultures, often called buzzards, are divided into two groups. There are 16 species of Old World Vultures in Europe, Asia and Africa. There are only three New World species in North America. We have two of these in the Village- Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures. The almost extinct California Condor is found only in California and Arizona.

Turkey Vultures are found throughout the United States. We in the South have them year around but they are migratory in the North. In fact, every March, the town of Hinckley, Ohio celebrates the return of Turkey Vultures much like San Juan Capistrano celebrates the return of the swallows. Black Vultures are permanent residents in the southern states.

There are a number of differences between Turkey and Black Vultures. Turkey Vultures are larger, nearly the size of an Eagle. They have a red head. In flight, their wings have a white tip and white trailing edge that extends all the way to the breast. Their flight, while graceful, has a tipsy characteristic that makes it seem as if they have a balance problem. Turkey Vultures use their sense of smell to help them find food. Black vultures are smaller and have a black head. They have white only on their wingtips. Their flight is steadier and more hawk-like. They use sight rather than smell to feed. Because of this, they often fly above the Turkey Vultures and then follow them

to food. Both Turkey and Black Vultures are monogamous ground nesters who look for protective rocks, caves or crevices as a place to lay eggs. Turkey and Black Vultures in the U.S. are increasing in population, maybe due to the never-ending source of roadkill. However, many Vultures in other parts of the world, especially Africa, are in trouble. Mostly, they are the unintended victims of poisoned carcasses set out to kill the mammalian predators that dine on livestock. Surprisingly, some cultures hunt Vultures for use in witchcraft or “alternative medicines”.

Unless you have a dead armadillo in your yard, our Village vultures aren't important as far as our trash is concerned. They are important, however, in most of the world where there are no POA type services. Forget your concept of refuse for a minute to think about this- there are places in the high mountains of Asia where funerals as we know them are not feasible, places where Vultures are celebrated and even revered. Think of it as having your soul lifted heavenward. Of course, everything organic is eventually recycled in one way or another. People who study this sort of thing have determined that vultures reduce decomposition time by 1/4 to 1/3. This means less stench but, much more importantly, less bacterial contamination related to potentially fatal diseases, such as, anthrax. Less vultures in the world means more health risk.

There are many ways to look at things. Disgusting aspects of environment aside, it's always amazing how well Nature works as a whole. Please consider this the next time you see a vulture.

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

Birds That Get No Respect (Part I)

“Virtuous Vultures”

by FSV Audubon (photos by Vic Prislipsky)