



# Vultures in Delaware



Vultures are often associated with grim and dark images, but they are actually a very important part of the ecosystem. Two different vultures, the Black and the Turkey vulture, call Delaware home.

Turkey vultures are larger, with a wingspan up to 5.5ft. They are most easily identified by their featherless head covered in red skin and bright ivory beak. When seen soaring, you will see the silvery gray edge of their wings.

Black vultures are smaller than Turkey vultures, with a 4.5-5ft wingspan. They are also “bald” but the skin on their head is black, as is their beak. Black vultures are much more compact, and they only have silvery gray feathers on the tips of their wings, instead of the whole back edge.

These two vultures are often seen together, as Black vultures use the Turkey vulture’s superior sense of smell to help find food.

## Why are They in my Backyard?

Vultures may be seen around your home for several reasons. Figuring out what is drawing vultures to your area is key to successfully living with them. Homeowners must keep in mind that scaring vultures away from their yard just chases them into someone else’s, and if no property damage is occurring the best solution is to live peacefully with nature.

## Nesting

### *What to do: Prevention*

Vultures often nest on flat raised structures. They don’t build a nest cup like songbirds. Instead, they lay their 2-3 eggs on a bare platform. As such, hunting stands are frequently used by vultures to raise young. Breeding and nesting begin in April, and both male and female care for chicks in the nest for 10-11 weeks after hatching. At this point the young vultures will “fledge” meaning they leave the nest, but vultures continue to stay with their parents until they migrate in the fall. Covering hunting stands, unused play areas or tree houses, or other raised platforms while not in use will prevent vultures from nesting in them. Once eggs are laid in a nest it is illegal to disturb them.

## Roosting

### *What to do: Prevent and Haze*

Vultures often gather together in large groups at night to “roost”. Vultures choose tall trees, cell towers, or even roofs which gives them a good location to bask in the morning sun the next day. This concentration of vultures in one place can lead to a very messy backyard or roof. The good news is that most of the bacteria normally found in bird excrement is killed by the acid in a vultures’ stomach. Therefore, disease concerns are minimal. If you would still prefer the vultures to find a new nightly roost, there are a few things you can do to discourage them.

If vultures are perching on your roof, you can install a **grid of monofilament** which prevents them from landing. It is very important that the grid is installed correctly, or birds might become entangled. Stretch lines of monofilament very tightly 6-8 inches above the surface you are protecting. A Nuisance Wildlife Control Operator may be willing to install this system for a fee.

If vultures are roosting in trees, you can **shake the trees** causing them to fly away, haze birds by shouting or clapping to **scare them away** or purchase a traditional or motion activated **sprinkler system** which would spray birds, causing them to leave. These activities are most effective as vultures arrive in the evening until after dark. Chasing them away in the morning will not stop them from returning at night. You may also choose to purchase deterrents such as: reflective tape, CD’s, or other reflective surface to hang around the area of roosting, as well as “scare balloons” or eagle decoys. All of these items make vultures weary of approaching the area.

## Eating

### *What to Do: Remove or Accept*

Fortunately for us, vultures are nature’s cleanup crew: they will consume all parts of dead animals aside from the bones and hides, working quickly and for free! This eliminates potential disease spread and recycles nutrients back into the environment. However, they are scavengers and will eat most things that they have access to. Therefore, the first thing to do when any unwanted wildlife is near a home, is to clean up any potential food sources. Secure any **garbage and pet food** that vultures might have access to and remove wildlife carcasses.

While wearing gloves, double bag the animal carcass and dispose of it in your normal trash. If the animal is too big to be disposed of this way, dragging it into nearby woods or other vegetated area is also a good option. Make sure you have permission to access any property not your own. If the animal carcass is in an area that is not causing safety

concerns such as a ditch, woodlot, or field, **the best course of action is to let the vultures do what they do best.**

### Is there a Disease Risk?

Many people don't like vultures near their homes because they think they are dirty. This is untrue! Vultures don't have feathers on their heads to help keep clean when they are eating. Additionally, even though they eat carrion (carcasses), the pH in their stomachs is so acidic that it kills almost all bacteria. Therefore, vulture droppings rarely spread disease. Finally, vultures travel to their food sources and don't bring it back to their roost at night. Vultures pose very little disease risk to humans.

### Can't you Just Remove Them?

Vultures are federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Removal is always lethal and would require federal permits which are only issued under extreme situations. If good vulture habitat exists on your property, it is likely that vultures will return even if removed. By taking the small steps above you can live more peacefully with vultures and still enjoy the environmental benefits of having them around.

### Why are Vultures Good?

Vultures provide an extremely important environmental service. They consume dead animals that would otherwise persist in the environment, spreading disease and unpleasant odors. By "recycling" these dead animals, vultures are also helping to spread those nutrients back into the ecosystem. Vultures are graceful soarers, watching them gracefully rise on thermal air currents or swoop dramatically along the shore can be enjoyable and exciting. Once the negative stereotype of these birds bringing death is overcome, the usefulness and strange beauty they possess is apparent.

For more information about the federal permitting process for lethal control, please contact our Raptor, Grassland, and Forest Bird Biologist at 302-735-8658, or our Wildlife Damage Biologist at 302-735-8683.