

Coragyps atratus (American Black Vulture or Corbeau)

Family: Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Corbeau, *Coragyps atratus*.

[<http://fireflyforest.net/firefly/2006/06/27/black-vultures/>, downloaded 12 November, 2011]

TRAITS. The American black vulture is a large bird that is mostly black. It measures between 56-68 cm in height (Wikipedia, 2011) and has an average wingspan of 150 cm (Firefly Forest, 2011). They can weigh between 2.5 to 6 pounds. It is characterised by its bald, wrinkled, charcoal-coloured head. It had broad wings with a distinctive whitish coloured tip at the ends and a short square-shaped tail (Buckley, 1999) (Fig. 2). The corbeau, like other vultures, is considered to be a scavenger and feed on carrion; the meat of dead carcasses. However they display certain hunting and predatory instincts as they feed on newborn animals and fruits, both ripe and rotting (Firefly Forest, 2011). It is a New World vulture, found between Uruguay in South America and the Southeast of the United States of America.

ECOLOGY. The American black vulture makes its habitat in dense forests with large trees and open spaces to facilitate its search for carrion. They tend to soar very high in the air while searching for food. This is signalled by the spreading of the wings as they glide in the air. They flap their wings in short bursts to generate the power to glide in search of their food. In a practice that is considered as thermoregulation, the American black vulture defecates on its legs, and allows the water content to evaporate and cool the body (Peterson and Peterson, 2002). They lack the vocal organ in birds known as syrinx and therefore have few vocal skills. Their only distinctive vocal element is a soft hiss when annoyed or irritated. In the wild, they live in forests with large open areas in large groups and tend to congregate on dead trees barren of leaves and branches. In areas with high human population, the vultures tend to gather at garbage dumps where there is a readily available source of food for foraging.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. Being scavengers and predators, these birds rely on each other to feed. This reliance is a core reason that they live together in large groups. They do this in order to maximize feeding opportunities and in large flocks, tend to scare away other scavengers from carrion. Another advantage of these large groups is that during feeding, they can be warned by other vultures in the group about any approaching dangers (Buckley, 1999). They generally establish permanent habitats in their range and tend to stay there with the exception of those found in the north, which tend to migrate during cold conditions. Even though their preferred habitat is forested areas, some reside in swamps and grasslands. They provide an astonishing view perched on tree branches and fence posts (Wikipedia, 2011). The birds spend most of their day searching for food but before they do so, they gather at communal ranges. This gives the less experienced foragers an opportunity to follow the others to carcasses to feed (Buckley, 1999). These birds are monogamous and they tend to form long lasting strong bonds with kin.

DIET. Much of the behaviour of these birds is as a result of their diet. Being scavenger birds mean that they feed on the meat of dead animals known as carrions (Fig. 3). However these animals also feed on newborn animals, eggs, fruits and submissive animals such as lamb and cattle (Peterson and Peterson, 2002). They are the only new world vultures that feed on cattle and they do this by picking at the cattle's nose and eyes until they are in shock and are killed. They still primarily feed on carrion and this is an integral part of the ecosystem as they get rid of the meat which harbours many diseases. In areas with human populations they feed on garbage dumps as they provide a readily available source of food for foraging. The American black vulture uses its sense of sight to find food, but often finds the carcass of an animal that has been dead for several days by following the turkey vulture, another species which has a greater sense of smell and can find rotting meat even when this is hidden in the forest. In rare cases these birds have been known to feed on fish, vegetable material and dung (Buckley, 1999).

REPRODUCTION. American black vultures do not mate at a specific time, their mating patterns varying with the latitude. Those found in northern regions do not begin mating until March, but those in southern regions can start mating as early as January. The mating pairs are formed after courtship ritual (Peterson and Peterson). This is done when several males form a circle around the desired female, they will spread their wings and bob their heads and take to the air chasing each other.

They do not make nests when laying their eggs and instead lay the eggs on a wooden area or some other suitable cavity. They lay between 1 to 3 eggs each clutch. The eggs are usually grey-green, bluish or white in colour and are smooth in texture, are oval and on average measure 7 centimetres by 5.5 centimetres (Wikipedia, 2011). The eggs are watched over by both parents who take turn incubating them. They hatch after anywhere between 28 to 41 days. After the eggs have hatched and hatchlings emerge, they are covered with white down and remain in the nest for approximately 2 months (Alderfer & Dunn, 2006). During this time they are provided with food via regurgitation by the parents. It takes between 75 to 80 days for them to learn to fly. In North America, the eggs are laid in October, in South America the eggs are laid in September. However, in Trinidad the eggs are laid later in November (Wikipedia, 2011).

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. American black vulture perched on dead tree showing wing span.

[[http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/American Black Vulture](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/American_Black_Vulture), downloaded 12 November, 2011]



Fig. 3. Vultures gathered around carcass of young deer.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Black-vultures-net.jpg>, downloaded 15 November, 2011]