

## *Sarcoramphus papa* (King Vulture)

Family: Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** King vulture, *Sarcoramphus papa*.

[[http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Sarcoramphus\\_papa/pictures/collections/contributors/susan\\_hoffman/king.vult/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Sarcoramphus_papa/pictures/collections/contributors/susan_hoffman/king.vult/)  
downloaded 8 March 2017]

**TRAITS.** Covered in a white fluff of feathers, with wings of length 180-198cm, the king vulture stands at about 67-77cm tall. Its wings are edged with black opalescent feathers of which its flight and tail feathers appear greyish-black. With its weight of 3-4.5kg, adult king vultures have strikingly magnificent eyes that are straw, white or silver in colour and multicoloured bald heads, neck and beak of red, orange and yellow. The beak is powerful and highly specialized for feeding with a hooked end and razor sharp edges (Fig. 1) (Animal Diversity Web, 2017).

**DISTRIBUTION.** It is widely distributed across South and Central America (Fig. 2) at up to 1500m above sea level (Animal Diversity Web, 2017). However it is not predominantly found west of the Andes but its presence has been discovered, surprisingly, at 2500m in the east Andes (Wikipedia, 2017). The king vulture is a rare visitor to Trinidad and Tobago (IUCN, 2017).

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** Residing in Neotropical habitats that range from savanna grasslands to swampy marshlands near forested areas, the king vulture is a diurnal creature that hunts in daytime. Soaring gracefully yet effortlessly in the sky, its wings seldom flap against the wind current. Its wings appear motionless, positioned flat with marginally elevated feathered ends as it glides across great distances in hope of sighting food (Fig. 3). Food may have bacteria and thus the vulture basks in the sun after feeding as the effect of the sunlight acts as a bacteria killing mechanism, in addition to strong stomach acid for consumed bacteria (National Geographic, 2009).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** Although the king vulture can seek out food on its own using its excellent eyesight it prefers to trail other carnivores for unconsumed remains (National Geographic, 2009). It seldom uses its olfactory (smell) sense (Lemon, 1999), but shadows the movement of other vultures like *Cathartes* species (the turkey vulture *C. aura* or *C. melambrotus*) to lead them to food sources. Their diet consist of any carcass be it cattle, fish or dead lizards (Fig. 4). King vultures raid carcasses from other vultures then proceed to tear through the flesh with their very strong beaks (MacroBird, 2017). This is beneficial to vultures with weaker beaks as this action enables them to eat the softer parts. The tougher parts of the carcass are eaten by the king vulture whose tongue is coarse and designed to assist in tearing the flesh off. According to the availability of sustenance, one or two and even a maximum of ten king vultures may be at a carcass at the same time (Animal Diversity Web, 2017).

**REPRODUCTION.** It is not known how long free king vultures live but in captivity they live up to 30 years (Animal Diversity Web, 2017). Upon reaching 4-5 years old, adult king vultures are ready to mate. Vultures have a lifetime mating partner. Earlier sexual maturity is observed in females. Breeding is preferred in the dry season. Only one egg is produced and safeguarded in the nest in a tree. The incubation period is 52-58 days (Ferguson-Lees and Christie, 2001). Both male and female incubate until the chick hatches and reaches one week old; a protective role is assumed by both parents. Young chicks are born helpless with wide open eyes and are covered with fluffy soft white feathers and are partially naked. A second coat of white soft feathers or down is observed growing by day ten (Fig. 5). Development of the chick is quite rapid (Animal Diversity Web, 2017).

**BEHAVIOUR.** When not gliding in search of food they rest in very tall trees or on rocky cliffs (Fig. 6) and stay hidden most of the time and are not known to be aggressive. Voice boxes are not present and hence result in them producing only loud croaking sounds and wheezing at the time of courtship. They mechanically control and lower their body temperature through deposition of faeces on their legs (Animal Diversity Web, 2017).

**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** There has been a reduction in numbers that has been attributed mainly to destruction of habitat and poaching. This reduction is not as critical so as to be recorded as endangered (IUCN, 2017).

**REFERENCES**

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**Fig. 2.** King vulture geographic distribution.

[<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22697645/0>, downloaded 5 March 2017]



**Fig. 3.** King vulture soaring in the sky.

[<http://macroevolution.group.shef.ac.uk/2015/07/>, downloaded 5 March 2017]



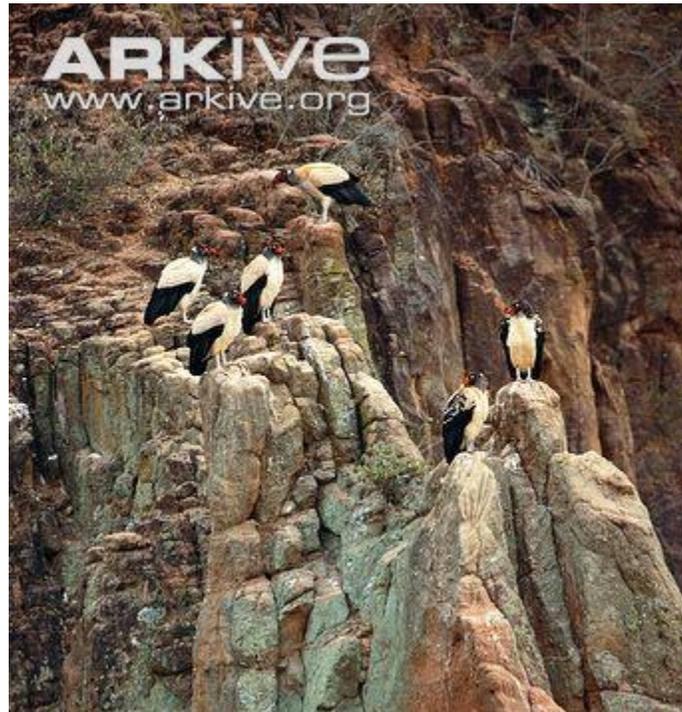
**Fig. 4.** King vulture feeding on armadillo carcass during day.

[<http://www.arkive.org/king-vulture/sarcoramphus-papa/image-G56205.html>, downloaded 5 March 2017]



**Fig. 5.** King vulture chick.

[<http://www.zooborns.com/zooborns/2011/02/brand-new-king-vulture-photographed-at-just-70-hours-old.html>  
downloaded 8 March 2017]



**Fig. 6.** King vultures resting on rocky cliff.

[<http://www.arkive.org/king-vulture/sarcoramphus-papa/image-G57792.html>, downloaded 8 March 2017]

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