

Kentucky's Vultures

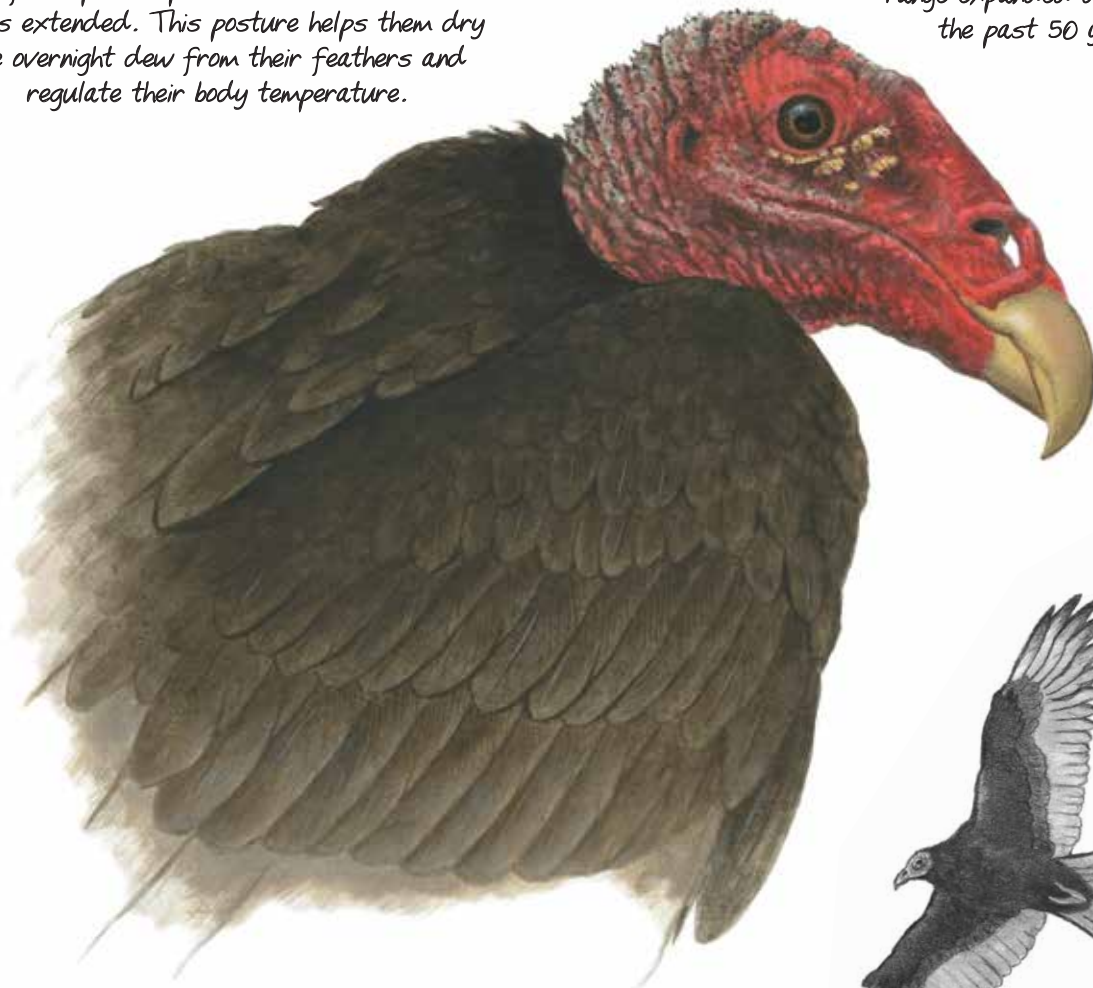
Voracious and valuable

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Kentucky is home to two species of vultures year-round: turkey vultures and black vultures. Buzzards, as they are often called, are often spotted perched in trees with their wings extended. This posture helps them dry the overnight dew from their feathers and regulate their body temperature.

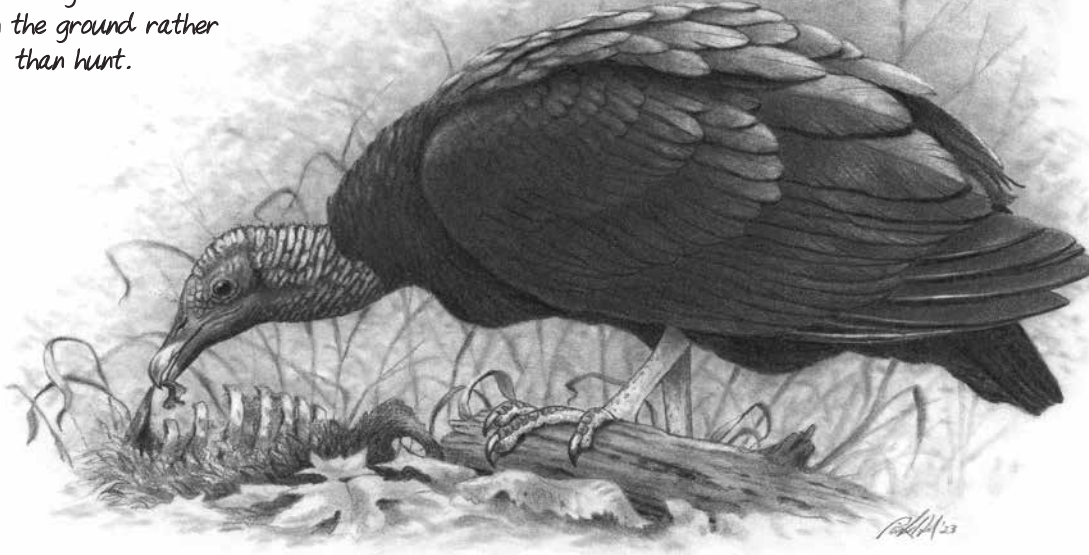
While turkey vultures have always been common in Kentucky, black vulture numbers in the state have increased as their range expanded during the past 50 years.



Turkey vulture

Both species of vultures are social; they feed, soar and roost in large flocks from fall to early spring. In summer, they spread out on the landscape to nest.

Even though they are quite large and seem formidable, vultures have weak feet and blunt talons. They must scavenge dead animals on the ground rather than hunt.



Vultures are specially adapted to handle bacteria found in carcasses. Their featherless heads resist debris while their exceptionally strong stomach acid kills most bacteria. A vulture may vomit to deter a predator, making its body lighter and aiding its escape.

Vultures stand about 2 feet tall with wingspans up to 6 feet. They weigh 3-4 pounds. They lack a voice box, so their vocalizations are limited to hisses and bill clacks.

So how to tell the difference? Black vultures have mostly black feathers and smoky gray heads while adult turkey vultures have brownish black feathers and red heads.

Black vultures are steady in flight. They hold their wings flat while soaring, with an occasional short, rapid wingbeat. Turkey vultures hold their wings in a V-shape in flight and often appear to be unsteady in the air.

The two species differ in their ability to smell: While the turkey vulture can detect carrion from a mile away, black vultures often follow turkey vultures to food because of their weak sense of smell. Black vultures are more assertive than the timid turkey vulture, and occasionally kill livestock that is young or weak.



Black vulture

Vultures are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and cannot be killed without a permit. While vultures are not the loveliest of creatures, they do provide an invaluable environmental service by quickly consuming rotting carcasses - which helps to control some insect populations and decrease the spread of disease.