

# Black Vulture Damage Control

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Black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*) are a native species to Kentucky, and in the last ten to twenty years their population numbers have increased to the point where they are common across much of the state. Vultures, both black and turkey, provide an important ecological service in consuming carrion, which reduces the risk of diseases spreading in the environment. Vultures, as with all other wildlife, will take advantage of resources available to them, and unfortunately this behavior sometimes involves human dwellings or livestock operations. Fortunately, vultures respond well to relatively simple methods that discourage them from congregating or feeding in critical areas.

## Characteristics and Appearance

Black vultures are approximately 23 to 27 inches in height and have a wingspread of more than 5 feet. They weigh 3.5 to 5 pounds. Black vultures are slightly smaller than the turkey vulture, the other Kentucky native, and can be distinguished from them in several ways. Most notably, the adult turkey vulture has a bright red head whereas the black vulture has a gray black head (Figure 1). In flight, black vultures hold their wings in a more horizontal position and tend to flap more compared to turkey vultures, which have more of a v-shaped profile and soar for longer durations without flapping.

Black vultures are present throughout the year in Kentucky. They are, however, a migratory species that ranges from South America to Canada, so their numbers tend to increase in Kentucky in the fall and winter as northern birds move south.

## Feeding Behavior

Vultures play a pivotal role in the ecosystem by feeding upon and thus cleaning up dead animal carcasses. Black vultures are usually carrion (dead animal) feeders.



Figure 1. The black vulture (left) has a grey head and slightly darker plumage than the turkey vulture (right). Tom Barnes, University of Kentucky

They will, however, kill small to medium-sized animals on occasion, in contrast to turkey vultures, which are strictly carrion feeders and do not kill any animals. Black vultures do not have the superior sense of smell that turkey vultures possess and therefore they tend to rely on turkey vultures to find carrion. Once found they will use their more aggressive behavior to chase the turkey vultures off the food source. Vultures in general will feed on the softest tissues first because of ease of feeding; the eyes, tongues, and hind quarters are typically missing from carrion that they have been feeding on.

## Roosting Behavior

Black vultures commonly roost in groups often comprised of both black vultures and turkey vultures, especially during the winter months. Group sizes vary, and they can get rather large; roosts of one hundred or more individuals are not uncommon. These roosts play an important role for the species, acting as a communication center. Vultures who have found carrion from the previous day are usually followed to their meals the next day by those individuals who were not successful in finding a meal or whose meal was completely consumed the previous day.

## Damage Issues

### Depredation

Black vultures may attempt to feed on newborn calves, lambs, goats, and piglets and will occasionally attempt to feed on the adults of these livestock.

### Roost Damage to Buildings and Vehicles

Large groups of vultures can cause several issues if they roost on or near buildings. For reasons not well understood, vultures sometimes will pick at materials that have a rubbery texture. Damage may include but is not limited to tearing pool covers, roof shingles, rubber roof liners, vent seals, and window caulking. Vultures may also start using nearby vehicles or boats as roost sites, and they may create issues by removing rubber seals, damaging windshield wipers, scratching paint, or removing vinyl seat covers from boats or tractors.

### Deterring Vultures

Vultures are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Under this act, the birds, their nests, and their eggs cannot be killed or destroyed without a Migratory Bird Depredation Permit

(see "Obtaining a Damage Permit"). It is perfectly legal, however, to harass vultures and use effigies to scare them away. The goal of harassment is to make the vultures feel unsafe or uncomfortable in an area, which may cause them to leave and not return. Techniques to disturb vultures include loud noises (i.e., blow horns), spraying with a garden hose, or using pyrotechnics. Other effective tools include the use of non-lethal shooting and propane cannons, especially in large pasture settings.

### Using Effigies

An effigy is a dead or fake dead animal that is hung in an area to deter that specific species from congregating. When displayed properly, effigies are extremely effective at deterring black vultures from using an area. Fake effigies (usually plastic dead bird decoys) can be purchased online and have been shown to be effective; however they are not as effective as a real

dead bird. Make sure the effigy is highly visible to vultures in the area you would like to protect. One of the best methods is to hang the vulture by its feet from a rope and suspend it in the air, making it visible from a distance. USDA Wildlife Services has completed multiple studies that demonstrate the success of eliminating vultures from an area by simply placing a highly visible vulture effigy at roost sites or landfills.

### Disturbing Roosts

Roosts can be disturbed as long as the birds are not nesting or raising young (Figure 3). Inspect a roost area for signs of an active nest (eggs or chicks) in late spring and early summer prior to starting a harassment program. Behavior of vultures in the area is a good indicator of presence of a nest. Vultures that are present in a suspected roost area long into the day and act agitated and only flush a short distance away when you are

present may have a nest nearby. Vultures lay their eggs directly on the ground, so when you inspect an area you want to look for an egg or two slightly larger than a chicken egg sitting on the ground. Vultures traditionally will nest along cliffs and in caves, hollow trees, brush piles, and stumps, and they have now adapted to abandoned buildings and possibly roof tops. Checking the areas around the suspected roosts would not constitute harassment of the nest since you are unaware of its presence. However, once the nest has been found, legally you must leave it alone and not purposefully perform any acts that are meant to cause the abandonment of the nest or chicks.

Roost disturbances should occur about a half hour prior to sunset until about a half hour after sunset and should be performed on multiple consecutive days to increase the probability of the birds permanently leaving the roost. With larger roosts it may be necessary to con-

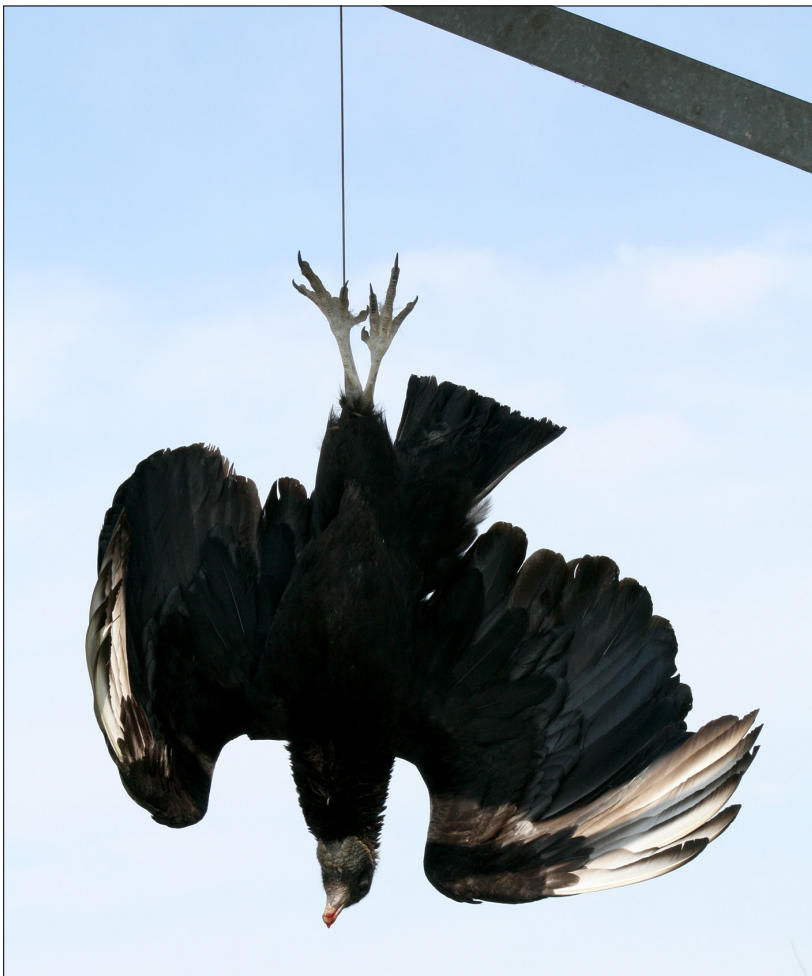


Figure 2. A black vulture effigy hung out in the open and clearly visible. USDA-APHIS



Figure 3. Black vulture nest with a chick and egg present. Matthew Springer, University of Kentucky

tinue the harassment for seven to fourteen days. Even if you are successful in causing the birds to leave the area they may return several weeks or months later and harassment be necessary again.

Since harassment efforts do require loud noises, there are potential legal implications. Prior to beginning harassment, especially those methods that involve any form of pyrotechnics, local authorities should be contacted to ensure compliance with any ordinances. In addition, since many roosts occur within residential areas, members of the community who may be directly impacted by the noises or lights should be informed. You can also hang an effigy as close to the roost as possible.

## Protecting Herds

Cultural practices such as moving livestock to a pasture that allows you to keep a close eye on them during birthing will aid significantly. This practice allows you to quickly respond to vultures that begin to congregate by harassing them with non-lethal means to keep them away from birthing areas. Place a vulture effigy around calving areas. Hang it at a high point that is visible from all sides directly adjacent to, or in, the calving pasture. It is helpful to concentrate calving operations in a pasture directly adjacent to the effigy to maximize its effectiveness.

After you believe the vultures are no longer a threat, or you are no longer expecting newborn livestock, you may want to place any non-plastic (i.e., birds taken by a damage permit) effigies in a plastic bag and freeze them so that they can be used again in the future if needed.

## Properly Disposing of Dead Livestock

When a depredation event occurs or when livestock succumb to any other form of mortality, disposing of dead livestock correctly can have substantial benefits for deterring future vulture problems and other wildlife-related issues. Decreasing the amount of time the carcass can be found by vultures and other predators will lower the risks of them frequenting the area.

## Documenting Vulture Depredation

If the depredation is actively occurring, snap some quick photos and then attempt to scare the birds away. In all other situations you also want take pictures of the suspected vulture depredated livestock as soon as possible after you find it. Make sure you take pictures of the entire animal, but focus on the face and rear parts of the animal (see Figure 4). The correct documentation is important as it may be difficult to determine whether black vultures have killed livestock they are feeding on or if they are simply feeding on animals that were already dead. Take photos as quickly as possible and remove the animal from the area to ensure that other vultures or wildlife species do not continue to feed on the carcass.

Contact Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) for instructions on how and where to send the



Figure 4. Examples of the damage that can be caused by black vultures and the type of photos necessary to identify black vulture kills. Notice that the rump and eyes were fed upon. The presence of bleeding from the eyes also indicates that the calf was alive before it was fed on. Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources

photos to the KDFWR biologist assigned to black vulture issues to confirm the cause of death. It may be possible to be reimbursed via the Livestock Indemnity Program if identification of the cause of death is possible and losses are severe. Contact your local extension agent regarding this reimbursement process.

### Obtaining a Damage Permit

If you have a severe problem, such that vultures are swarming around your newborn livestock, obtaining a take permit may be necessary. A permit to take black vultures is obtained through U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. No state-level permits are required in Kentucky as long as a federal permit is obtained.

Currently the Kentucky Farm Bureau has been issued a number of permits that they can sub-permit to Kentucky farmers, allowing them to take up to five black vultures when livestock is being threatened. Kentucky Farm Bureau has their own process in determining who obtains a sub-permit. Obtaining a permit from the Kentucky Farm Bureau is the most efficient manner at this time. Contact them as soon as the problem exists in order to reduce risk of multiple livestock losses.

Individuals can also apply to obtain permits directly from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, however this process takes time and would not allow for a quick remedy of any problems that are currently occurring. You must contact USDA Wildlife Services to obtain a WS Form 37 to accompany your USFWS permit application.

### Additional Information

Kentucky Department Fish and Wildlife Resources vulture information: <http://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Problems-with-Vultures.aspx>. Contact: 1-800-858-1549. Photos of potential vulture depredation may be sent to biologist Kate Slankard, email: [kate.slankard@ky.gov](mailto:kate.slankard@ky.gov).

Kentucky law for disposal and composting dead animals: <http://www.kyagr.com/statevet/animal-disposal-and-rendering.html>.

Procedure to obtain a vulture permit from Kentucky Farm Bureau: <http://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Documents/BlackVultureDepredationPermitProcess.pdf>. Contact: L. Joe Cain, 502-495-7738, email: [Joe.Cain@kyfb.com](mailto:Joe.Cain@kyfb.com).

Procedure to obtain a vulture permit directly from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service: <https://www.fws.gov/south-east/birds/black-vulture/>.

Renderers who pick up dead animals: [http://www.kyagr.com/statevet/documents/OSV\\_AD\\_DeadAnimalPickup.pdf](http://www.kyagr.com/statevet/documents/OSV_AD_DeadAnimalPickup.pdf).

USDA Wildlife Services vulture page: [https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/wildlife-damage/operational-activities/SA\\_Vultures](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/wildlife-damage/operational-activities/SA_Vultures). Contact: 866-4USDAWS (866-487-3297)

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