



[Town of Leesburg Vulture FAQ](#)

**Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy recommended additions and revisions
December 15, 2014**

Page Title: Change from "Vulture Dispersal FAQ", to "Vulture Management FAQ" or another more neutral title.

Opening paragraph:

Change from: "Vultures serve an important function in the environment, but occasionally their selected roosting locations cause property damage and health concerns. Effective dispersal of vultures from these roosts benefits both residents and vultures in the long term."

to: "Vultures serve many important functions in our environment. They consume the carcasses of dead animals that might otherwise lie rotting in our roadsides, parks, and backyards, and help to prevent the spread of disease-causing bacteria. Vultures also benefit the environment through their role in nutrient cycling, the process through which organic and inorganic materials move between living organisms and their environment. Humane management of vulture populations can help our citizens in the long term, allowing people to benefit from vultures' important ecological contributions.

[Note: A useful source for this information is "The Need to Quantify Ecosystem Services Provided by Birds", co-authored in 2011 by Travis L. Devault of the USDA National Wildlife Research Center and several others, available at http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2345&context=icwdm_usdanwrc. Key quote: "The ecological importance of scavenging birds is often underappreciated. Despite the common assumption that decomposers (i.e., microbes and insects) are primarily responsible for recycling carrion biomass, DeVault et al. (2003) demonstrated that vultures and other vertebrate scavengers usually consume most available carcasses in terrestrial ecosystems. Although vultures are one of the most recognizable types of birds to non-ornithologists, this familiarity is often not accompanied by appreciation of the services they provide. By scavenging, vultures and other carnivorous vertebrates contribute to waste removal, disease regulation, and nutrient cycling (Houston 1979, DeVault et al. 2003).]

FAQ Question 1: Change from "**Vultures aren't new to this area. Why is their presence a problem now?**" to "Vultures aren't new to this area. What has changed?" or other more neutral wording.

Suggested revisions to the answer:

Part a

- **Change from:** "Vultures are highly adaptive creatures and their populations are increasing. Unlike some types of wildlife that shy away from human contact, vultures have adapted to the human environment – perhaps a bit too well. ... As stands of trees in backyards and parks have matured, the birds have become more attracted to these areas for their nightly roosting."
- **to** "The human population of the Town of Leesburg and Loudoun County has approximately tripled since 1990. [Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count](#) data shows that the Black Vulture population grew rapidly from 1997 to 2006 but has slightly declined since then, and that the Turkey Vulture population has on average remained stable since 1997. Both Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures had been threatened in the mid-20th century by side effects of DDT, and their populations began rebounding after the 1972 US ban on that pesticide. Theories about other factors affecting vulture populations include availability of roadkill, human food waste, and pet food. It is also possible that as stands of trees in backyards and parks have matured, the birds have become more attracted to these areas for their nightly roosting."

*[Note: one useful source is the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Black Vulture and Turkey Vulture pages, especially the Conservation sections near the bottom of each:
http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/black_vulture/lifehistory/ac
[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/turkey_vulture/lifehistory.](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/turkey_vulture/lifehistory)]*

Part b

Current wording: "Their behavior can be destructive. They have been known to tear window and roof caulking, vent seals, shingles, rubber seals on car windshields, windshield wipers and other soft, rubbery materials. Their excrement is highly corrosive and damaging to painted surfaces and landscaping. The birds also regurgitate a reeking and corrosive vomit. When the birds congregate in large numbers (we have seen groups of more than 100 birds) in backyards, the result is that homeowners experience property damage and face health concerns related to the accumulations of excrement and vomit."

Our recommendation for each of the points in this section is to provide more specific information. For example:

- Have these destructive behaviors occurred in or near the Town of Leesburg? How frequently? What specific property damage has resulted?
- While people may express health concerns, we have not found evidence to support such concerns. As discussed in the opening section above, evidence strongly indicates that vultures contribute to public health. The [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) writes for example: "threats include trapping and killing due to erroneous fears that they spread disease. Far from it, vultures actually reduce the spread of disease."

FAQ Question 2: Change from "**Won't the vultures naturally leave on their own?**" to "Will the vultures naturally leave on their own?", for a more neutral tone.

Suggested slight revision to the answer, for a more neutral tone:

- **Change from:** "Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures are migratory birds. However, as their populations increase, their range has increased as well. We typically see both species in the Leesburg area year-round. However, we do get larger concentrations of vultures during the winter, from late November through early February."
- **to:** "We typically see both Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures in the Leesburg area year-round. Both species are migratory birds, and while their numbers increase from late November through early February, they decline again each year as non-resident birds migrate north and flocks disperse."

FAQ Question 3: "Are my pets safe?"

- **Change answer from:** "Vultures are primarily carrion eaters. They mostly eat animals that are already dead. However, Black Vultures have been known to prey upon small, live, relatively defenseless animals. There are no accounts of Turkey Vultures preying upon live animals."
- **to:** "According to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), vultures feed solely on carrion, preferring animals that have been dead for two to four days. USDA Wildlife Services in Virginia has logged occasional reports of Black Vulture predation on pets, but notes that these cases are not well documented. There are no accounts of Turkey Vultures preying upon live animals."

[Sources: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/birds/raptors/> and [http://www2.ca.uky.edu/anr/Vulture/Lowney%20black%20vulture%20article%20\(1999\).pdf](http://www2.ca.uky.edu/anr/Vulture/Lowney%20black%20vulture%20article%20(1999).pdf)]

FAQ Question 4: "How can I tell the difference between a Turkey Vulture and a Black Vulture?"

- **Current answer wording:** "Turkey Vultures are larger, weighing about 4-5 pounds, with a wingspan of 6 feet. The Turkey Vulture's most distinctive feature is its bright red, featherless head. In flight, a Turkey Vulture often appears to be "wobbling" and, from underneath, all of the flight feathers are light colored. Black Vultures are smaller, weighing less than 4 pounds, with a wingspan of 5 feet or less. The Black Vulture's head is grey and unfeathered, but larger in proportion than the Turkey Vulture's. Viewed in flight, only the outer flight feathers of the Black Vulture are white. Black Vultures are the more aggressive of the two species."
- **Our recommendation:** Remove final sentence, "Black Vultures are the more aggressive of the two species." This sentence over-simplifies behavioral distinctions between the two species, and does not help with species identification.

Suggested new FAQ Question: "What can citizens do to discourage large numbers of vultures from roosting in our residential and commercial neighborhoods?"

- **Recommended answer:**
"Sources including USDA Wildlife Services and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries agree that many human-wildlife conflicts - including those with vultures -

can be prevented or resolved by removing obvious attractants. Ensure that trash is not accessible to vultures or other wildlife, and that pet food is not left outside.

It is also important to note that according to Virginia law, "It is unlawful to place, distribute, or allow the placement of food, minerals, carrion, trash, or similar substances when it attracts any species of wildlife in such numbers or circumstances to cause property damage, endanger any person or wildlife, or create a public health concern."

[Sources:

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/problems/>

<http://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title4/agency15/chapter40/section286>

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/wildlife_damage/content/printable_version/fs_vulture_damage_man.pdf]

FAQ Question 5: Change from: What is the Town doing to get rid of the vultures?

to: "What is the Town doing to help with vulture population management?"

- **Current answer wording:**

"The Town of Leesburg has contracted with the USDA's Wildlife Services Program to provide vulture damage management assistance. The USDA WS officials will conduct dispersal efforts, including the use of lights and noise makers that are deployed in the evening just before dark, when the birds are starting to roost. These dispersal methods encourage the birds to move away from the areas where they are causing damage.

All dispersal activities will take place on town property or private property where we have the owner's consent."

- **Our recommendation:**

Present a range of vulture population management approaches, starting with attractant management as discussed above, and relatively low-cost and humane perch deterrents that USDA Wildlife Services has also researched and recommended for many situations - including motion-activated sprinklers (for temperatures above freezing), Coyote Rollers, and Nixalite spikes. A 2007 document we obtained from USDA Wildlife Services is attached. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy generally does not support the use of effigies, and we appreciate that this method is not included in your FAQ.

FAQ Question 6: Will the Town or USDA WS kill any vultures?

Current answer wording: No, the lights and noise are just annoying to the birds. As a result, they will not roost, but will move off to another roosting location.

Our Comment: We appreciate the "no" answer in this FAQ.

FAQ Question 7: I have lots of vultures roosting in my backyard. Can I pay an exterminator to kill or trap the birds?

Current answer wording: Vultures are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The birds, their nests and eggs cannot be killed or destroyed without a permit from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service. If you are having a problem with large numbers of vultures roosting in or near your backyard, please contact the Leesburg Police Department at 703-771-4500.

Our Comment: We appreciate that Migratory Bird Treaty Act restrictions are clearly stated here.

Suggested new FAQ Question: "Where can I go to learn more about vultures?"

- **Recommended answer:** The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy [website](#) includes vulture-related articles from the *Habitat Herald* newsletter, and links to numerous sources of additional information.