

(Jeff Lemmons)



Cathartidae the AMERICAN VULTURES

Two species of vultures are widespread in North America: the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture. These birds are large raptor-like birds with sharp bills and talons, and they are quite unique as neither of them has any feathers on their head. At 25–26 inches, these birds are about 6 inches larger than our common Red-tailed Hawk. Vultures have been known locally as “Buzzards” or “Carrion Birds” and they have had a long, intimate history with farmers here in the Carolina Piedmont.

Vultures are scavengers. They can eat live animals, but they seldom choose to do so. They prefer to seek out animal carcasses and consume them. Often, the dead animals they find are wild animals, but they regularly feed on dead domestic livestock as well. Vultures have a good sense of sight and a very keen sense of smell, and they use both to locate their food.

From the time of the earliest settlers until the turn of the twentieth century, vultures lived and fed in very close proximity to man. In fact, they provided an essential sanitation service needed at every farm and market. They conveniently disposed of dead animals and unused animal parts that could otherwise spread disease. They were considered to be “a most effective street-cleaning department” and were widely recognized as helping to “purify” city dumps. This piece was carried in the *Statesville Record and Landmark* on July 1, 1886:

The so-called turkey buzzard is not a buzzard but a vulture. By insisting upon this distinction the buzzard tribe could improve its reputation for cleanliness. It is against the law in almost every Southern State to shoot a turkey buzzard. There are two excellent reasons for this prohibition: the buzzards are the scavengers of the South, and there is no telling what sort of pestilence a dead turkey buzzard would bring on if anybody should kill one. ... he is not shy of mankind. He hovers over the market places in Southern cities, waiting for business to close; and when the crowd of purchasers has departed he descends and feasts upon the odds and ends that have fallen from the butchers' and the fishmongers' knives.

In fact, in the nineteenth century, vultures were an integral part of daily life on most Southern farms. Farmers relied upon them to clean up dead animals and animal parts so they wouldn't have to be buried, and, at times, these buzzards were treated like pets or even tamed as pets. One author noted: “...they become fond of being handled, and soon follow persons around like dogs. They express pleasure by a low hiss; displeasure by a more forcible hiss.”

It was not uncommon for farmers or their kids to strap bells on their buzzards like they did their sheep or goats. Sometimes they inscribed the bell with the farmer's name and date. From the time of the Civil War through World War I, many Southern newspapers reported anecdotal accounts of “belled buzzards” that were heard and seen flying throughout the Carolinas and Georgia. In some areas, the sight of a belled buzzard was considered a bad omen that preceded destructive storms or a death.

One account published in *The Anson Times* in 1884, reported that when a belled buzzard flew over a sharecropper's cabin in Georgia, the occupants “rushed out and beheld a great black object and heard the tinkling of the bell hundreds of feet in the air, great fear seized them. They all took to their knees under the impression that the end of the world was at hand.” An account published in *The Gastonia Gazette* in 1905 claimed one buzzard in upstate South Carolina that was “belled in May 1879, by Mr. J.W. Burriss” in Starr, SC, as a “boyish prank,” was still alive and flying about the area 26 years later. Perhaps the most interesting of these accounts was published in Cabarrus County's *Standard* newspaper on July 26, 1900:

Almost every year some one sees a buzzard in some part of the county with a bell attached to it. The one this year was found last week at the McAllister place near Mt. Pleasant by Mr. D.M. Blackwelder. Mr. Blackwelder says that the bird was on the ground and seemed unable to fly. Around its neck was attached a small brass bell with the following inscription on it: “H.B., Havana, Cuba, Jan. 6, 1878.” The date will to many tend to make it incredible but probably buzzards are like goats—never known to die a natural death.

This possibly represents the earliest recapture of a marked bird in the Central Carolinas region. Unfortunately, there is no way to verify the actual species of bird that was found or the veracity of the claim itself. However, it remains quite a remarkable anecdote.

This close relationship between farmers and vultures came to an unexpected end shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. Hog cholera spread throughout the South, wiping out hogs on farms in many areas. In 1905, two German scientists in North Carolina claimed that buzzards were to blame in helping spread the disease and “a crusade against buzzards” began to spread, supporting their extermination:

“With this information at hand these professors approached the leading farmer member of the House and requested him to introduce this extermination measure. But the representative was not prepared to so easily surrender his faith of a life time in buzzards’ usefulness, and he has flatly refused to even make a move to repeal the present law against killing buzzards. So unless some representative is willing to run the risk of acquiring an undesirable nickname by introducing an anti-buzzard bill these scavengers will continue to enjoy the protection of the laws of North Carolina.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, January 23, 1905

The debate continued for at least the next 10 years when a law was passed requiring the burial of infected animals and permitting the killing of vultures. In February 1915, hog cholera was found in farms in Mecklenburg County. A new “anti-hog cholera” serum was requested from the state to treat local livestock. In an announcement about the infection, *The Charlotte News* reported this comment from the state veterinarian: “Since there is no question but what the buzzard disseminates these germs, especially hog cholera germs, every farmer would be justifiable in killing all the buzzards he possibly can.”

An editorial was published in *The Charlotte News* a few months later lamenting this change of opinion about the buzzard’s once “respected position in society”:

But there seems to be breaking over the country a sort of disillusionment. Instead of being a friend and a valuable servant of the human race, the buzzard is now being pictured as a danger and a menace. ... Since annual losses from hog cholera amount to many millions of dollars in this country it is more than likely that the activities of the turkey buzzard will be curtailed as his evil conduct is noised abroad. Besides the age has outgrown the buzzard’s field of usefulness. Instead of leaving the work of cleaning up refuse to his buzzardship men nowadays burn carcasses and do away with all kinds of refuse. Modern sanitary rules have practically put the buzzard out of business. We may have even reached the period where the laws will offer inducements rather than punishment for buzzard destruction.

Two years later, at the height of World War I, *The Charlotte Observer* published a letter to the editor that said: “The buzzard is now an outlaw in North Carolina and should be killed whenever possible, because it has been proven that the buzzard disseminates cattle diseases. ... Kill the buzzard and the Kaiser!” It must be noted that epidemiologists later confirmed that vultures that consumed hogs infected with cholera were unable to spread the virus; thus, the reason for the start of this “crusade against buzzards” was entirely unfounded.

Over the next half century, vultures received virtually no protection and little respect in the Carolinas. By the 1970s, both the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture were designated as Threatened in the state of North Carolina, indicating they were “likely to become Endangered within the foreseeable future if certain conditions are not met.” Black Vulture populations had declined much more significantly than Turkey Vulture populations due to changes in livestock practices that led to a widespread shortage of the large carcasses they prefer. In addition to shooting, other possible causes of the decline of both vultures included: trapping, nest destruction, changes in farm management, changes in sanitation and landfill practices, use of pesticides, and death by collision (vehicles, planes, and towers). Fortunately, education and conservation efforts were implemented on these birds’ behalf, and, by 1989, the North Carolina Turkey Vulture population had recovered enough to be “de-listed,” and the status of Black Vulture was upgraded to Special Concern.

Today, despite continued hardships, both species appear to have beaten the odds and have now largely recovered from these declines. In fact, one North Carolina population study suggested Black Vultures are now “experiencing high rates of survival and fertility, potentially breeding at an age younger than previously assumed and growing rapidly.” Both vultures have been removed from the North Carolina rare animal list, and populations appear to be doing fairly well in both states with the possible exception of dense urban areas. However, public education about the importance of these special birds and the role they play in our environment is still needed. Over 100 vultures were admitted for treatment at the Carolina Raptor Center in 2014 and 2015 due in part to gunshot wounds, leg traps, collisions with cars, possible poisoning, and becoming orphaned due to nest destruction.

The Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture differ in several distinct ways. The featherless head and neck of the Black Vulture are black, while the head and neck of the Turkey Vulture are red in adult birds. The bill of the Black Vulture is black with a bone-colored tip, versus a red bill with a bone-white tip of the Turkey Vulture. Its feathers appear deep black, while the feathers of the Turkey Vulture appear brownish because of their rusty edging. In flight, the Black Vulture's wings appear flat, its tail short and square, and underneath, the tips of its wings are silvery-white. The Turkey Vulture has a longer tail, two-toned wings that are black with a silver trailing edge seen from below, and the wings are held in a dihedral position, not flat. The Black Vulture flies with short, snappy, wing beats, while the Turkey Vulture tips from side to side and its wing beats seem slow. The Turkey Vulture is larger overall than the Black Vulture. In general, Black Vultures are more gregarious. They feed in groups on larger prey and today are often seen along roadsides feeding on deer. Both species still frequent landfills.