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Black Vultures

Black vultures are not as common in Kansas as the turkey vulture but recorded sightings do show they are here, at least in the southeast part of the state anyway.

On my commute to work this morning, I crossed the Lowell Reservoir and was able to capture a couple pictures of a large black bird perched on the bridge rail. After confirming the picture with our K-State Wildlife Biologist, Dr. Drew Ricketts, it is in fact a black vulture.

Cornell University describes the black vulture as a “compact bird with broad wings, short tail, and powerful wingbeats”. These raptors are uniform black except on the underside of their wingtips there are white patches also called “stars”. Their heads are bare and black in color. Both adult male and female black vultures have a wingspan of 53-59 inches and estimated to be the size of an adult goose.

In the morning hours’ black vultures can be found roosting in groups at the tops of trees, transmissions towers, and in the case of my sighting experience; the top of the Lowell Reservoir building in Lowell, KS, waiting for the air to warm up and for thermals to develop. During the day, black vultures soar in flocks, often with turkey vultures and hawks. Their flight style is distinctive: strong wingbeats followed by short glides, giving them a bat-like appearance (Cornell University). Often black vultures flock with their red-headed relatives, the turkey vultures, because of the lack of their smell. The turkey vulture has an excellent sense of smell and the black vulture is sure to take advantage. Black vultures feed almost entirely on carrion, locating it by soaring high in the skies on thermals. From this vantage they can spot carcasses and also keep an eye on turkey vultures who fly lower and follow them toward food. Black vultures can and often gather in numbers at carcasses and then displace turkey vultures from the food. Their carrion diet includes feral hogs, poultry, cattle, donkeys, raccoons, coyotes, opossums, striped skunks, and armadillos. Sometimes black vultures wade into shallow water to feed on floating carrion, or to catch small fish. They occasionally kill skunks, opossums, night-herons, leatherback turtle hatchlings, and livestock, including young pigs, lambs, and calves. (Cornell University).

Black Vultures are monogamous, staying with their mates for many years, all year round. Typically, they nest in caves, hollow trees, abandoned buildings, brush piles, thickets, and stumps and if the nesting site is successful, they will use it for years to come. They feed their young for as many as eight months and will maintain strong social bonds with their families throughout their lives. They roost in large flocks in the evening, using the communal roost as a meeting place where foraging groups can assemble and adults can reunite with their young. Unsuccessful foragers can locate food by following their roost mates to carcasses. They can become aggressive when nonrelatives try to join at roosts or if followed to food sources. They attack each other by pecking, biting, wing-pummeling, and foot-grappling (Cornell University). Black Vultures primarily live in the southern region of the United States and into South America. In recent decades, they have expanded their range northward. Sightings as far as England have been reported (Cornell University).

 Vultures are often overlooked as lowly scavengers. However, they are a key component to maintaining healthy environments. Because of their role as nature’s garbage disposers, vultures are able to keep the ecosystem clean and free of contagious diseases. Vultures have an extremely acidic stomach that allows them to consume rotting animal corpses (carrion). Rotting meat can be infected with rabies, botulinum toxins, rabies, and hog cholera, tuberculosis and other diseases that would otherwise kill other scavengers. When vultures rid the ground of dead animals, they prevent diseases from spreading to humans and animals.

Source

The Cornell Lab, Cornell University