

Name: _____

Valuable Vultures

by Guy Belleranti

What do you think of when you hear the word "vulture"? Many people think vultures are icky because they eat the remains of other animals. While it's true that most vultures are scavengers that eat carrion (dead animals), this is actually a really good thing! By eating carrion, vultures help prevent the spread of disease into our soil and water. This makes vultures very valuable!



Biologists divide vultures into two groups – Old World and New World. Old World vultures live in Africa, Asia, and Europe. New World vultures live North, Central, and South America. There are no vultures in Australia or Antarctica. Old World and New World vultures are not close relatives. Still, they do have things in common:

- Many, have bald or lightly feathered heads. This helps keep their heads clean when they consume the meat of other animals.
- They have sharp, hooked beaks for ripping meat apart.
- Their strong stomach acids kill bacteria that would make most animals sick.

Also, both Old World and New World vultures have large wings and can glide without flapping them. This helps them save energy when they're searching for food. This is especially important for large, heavy vultures like South America's Andean condor, North America's extremely endangered California condor, and Asia's Himalayan vulture.

Vultures hunt during the day, when most other animal scavengers are sleeping. Old World vultures often glide over open areas like grasslands and deserts. Great eyesight helps them spot dead animals. Many New World vultures live in rain forests where plants make the ground difficult to see. Three species, the turkey vulture and the greater and lesser yellow-

headed vultures, use their great sense of smell to find food. This is unusual, since most birds can barely smell at all.

Vultures must eat fast, or risk losing food to larger vultures. They store most of their meal in a throat pouch (or crop) for eating at another time. In order to find their next meal, vultures will often watch other vultures and follow the one who's found something to eat.

Not all vultures rely solely on scavenging to get their food. For example, some Old World vultures use their tough, eagle-like feet and sharp beaks to hunt and kill prey, as well as eating carrion. You might be surprised to learn that one Old World vulture, the palm-nut vulture, is primarily vegetarian. While it does eat meat, it prefers the fruit of oil palms. It has a feathered head, and when it does eat meat, it's usually small live animals, not carrion.

Now you know that vultures aren't just valuable, there's quite a variety of them!

About the Author

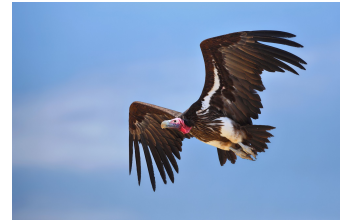


Guy Belleranti is an author of fiction, poetry, articles, puzzles, and humor for children and adults. He also works as a docent at the Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences teaching children about the wild animals at the zoo.

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1. Based on the information you read in the article, why are you more likely to spot vultures feeding in a group rather than eating alone?
 - a. Vultures must work together to attack and kill their prey.
 - b. Vultures flock to wherever another vulture has already found food.
 - c. Vultures eat together to protect each other from being attacked by predators.
 - d. Vultures feed in groups so they can attract a mate.

2. In the article, you learned about Old World vultures and New World vultures.

Below are descriptions of several species of vultures. On the line next to each description, write **OW** if it is an Old World vulture being described or **NW** if it is a New World vulture being described.

_____ The palm-nut vulture inhabits forests and grasslands in Africa.

_____ The turkey vulture is commonly seen across the Americas and into Canada.

_____ The king vulture resides in Central and South America.

_____ You can find the white-rumped vulture in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

3. What advantage do vultures have over other scavengers in searching for food?
 - a. Vultures have better hearing than other scavengers.
 - b. Vultures are more aggressive than other scavengers.
 - c. Vultures search for food during the day, while others scavengers are asleep.
 - d. Vultures are faster than other scavengers.

4. Which of the vulture's five senses is most unusual and why?

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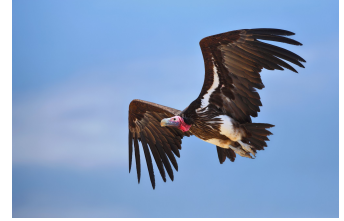
The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. _____ v e s a g c r n s e
hint: animals that eat dead or decaying matter
2. _____ e i e n a v a g r t
hint: eating only plants
3. _____ g e d r n e a n d e
hint: at risk of becoming extinct
4. _____ i l b g t s o i s o
hint: scientists that study living things
5. _____ a t v r i y e
hint: a wide array; diversity
6. _____ s c m u e n o
hint: ingest; eat or drink
7. _____ c i b r e a t a
hint: single-celled organisms that can cause disease
8. _____ p f i p a l g n
hint: moving wings up and down in order to fly
9. _____ r e t p n v e
hint: keep something from happening
10. _____ s g d s a r s l n a
hint: large open areas covered with grass

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In the article, "Valuable Vultures," you learned that even though many people think vultures are gross because they eat dead animals, they are actually helpful to their environment.

Think of another animal that has a bad reputation (people don't like that animal very much). On the lines below, explain why that animal is actually valuable to its surroundings.

ANSWER KEY

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1. Based on the information you read in the article, why are you more likely to spot vultures feeding in a group rather than eating alone? **b**
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4. Which of the vulture's five senses is most unusual and why?

Vultures have a great sense of smell. This is unusual because most birds can hardly smell at all.

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hint: animals that eat dead or decaying matter
2. vegetarian e i e n a v a g r t
hint: eating only plants
3. endangered g e d r n e a n d e
hint: at risk of becoming extinct
4. biologists i l b g t s o i s o
hint: scientists that study living things
5. variety a t v r i y e
hint: a wide array; diversity
6. consume s c m u e n o
hint: ingest; eat or drink
7. bacteria c i b r e a t a
hint: single-celled organisms that can cause disease
8. flapping p f i p a l g n
hint: moving wings up and down in order to fly
9. prevent r e t p n v e
hint: keep something from happening
10. grasslands s g d s a r s l n a
hint: large open areas covered with grass