

VULTURES IN PENNSYLVANIA

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Vultures in Pennsylvania are not an uncommon sight — Pennsylvania is home to two native species of New World Vultures, the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) and the Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*). The Turkey Vulture is a large bird covered in black feathers with a pale, bald hot-pink head. The underside of the bird is black and white: with white underwings in the back and dark feathers in the front.

This contrasts the underside of the Black Vulture, which is uniformly black except for the ends of the wings which are white. The Black Vultures, minus their underwings, are almost completely black, even their skin, which has a wrinkly look to it. Black Vultures are shorter in wingspan than their poultry-named counterparts with their longest being 60 inches. On the other hand (wing, perhaps), Turkey Vultures can reach up to 70 inches in wingspan.

It is important to note that Turkey Vultures can be found all over Pennsylvania, but Black Vultures are much more commonly found on the southern side of it rather than the northern, where they are significantly rarer.

When circling in the sky, it can be hard to tell these two species of birds apart, especially when looking at them in their juvenile forms (that's a whole different story, color-wise). Binoculars or a camera with zoom are recommended for this reason when you're out vulture-watching, as one does. Once you've got your gear, you're ready to head out and search for vultures.

Locating these scavengers of the sky can be as easy as taking a stroll around your neighborhood and keeping an eye on the sky. However, if you want a higher chance of sighting some, there are certain kinds of habitats in Pennsylvania you could go looking in. For Turkey Vultures, an easy one is to cruise along the highway, looking for them flying around the road and roosting in roadside trees. If you're the driver, I would not recommend trying to find vultures and driving, but as a passenger, this is a fine strategy.

Farmland tends to yield promising results, especially where farmland meets forest — I've had a lot of success finding TUVUs (Turkey Vultures) in exactly this type of area. Open grassland is an excellent choice as well.

For Black Vultures, lowland forested areas next to undisturbed fields are pristine habitats. Of course, there's a chance you'll see them out and about randomly just as you would Turkey Vultures (highways are also a great place to watch out for BLVUs) but they're smaller in population. A great spot for both and a bunch of other raptor species is Hawk Mountain Sanctuary.

It is also not uncommon to see TUVUs and BLVUs congregating over the same carrion. Since they fill the same ecological niche, they have no choice but to share the same resources, which they often do.

Turkey Vultures have an excellent sense of smell, which is what leads them to their food. Black Vultures are not as strong in the olfactory department, meaning that they



BLVU in flight



TUVU in flight

generally rely on sight to find theirs — they sometimes even follow TUVUs as they descend on a carcass to get some free food, and then fight them for it. BLVUs do not build nests and instead nest on the ground or in abandoned human structures. TUVUs also do not build nests but prefer hidden and dark places like crevices and caves to lay their eggs. Though there are thousands, it is quite uncommon to find a vulture nesting site in Pennsylvania, but not unheard of.

These are the basic differences and similarities in habits and appearance of Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures. They're all over Pennsylvania, so have fun finding them!

Bibliography:

Wheeler, B. K., & Economidy, J. M. (2018). *Birds of Prey of the East: A Field Guide*. Princeton University Press.



A Turkey Vulture flies over farmland and forest at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, PA