



## Meet the Vultures of New Jersey



### Scavengers of the Skies

Look up to the sky on any warm day and you often catch a glimpse of **black vultures** (*Coragyps atratus*) soaring overhead. They are impressive black birds with sooty gray, featherless heads and legs. With wings outstretched, the tips of their primary wings look like they've been dipped in silvery paint. Their flight pattern helps to identify them even when they are high in the sky as they take a few deep flapping wingbeats and then stretch their wings wide as they glide.

Once a southern species, the black vulture has expanded its range through the Northeast. They feed almost exclusively on carrion (decomposing animals) and find food by scanning the landscape from the air. They have also learned to spy on their relatives, the turkey vultures, to pilfer a free meal. Turkey vultures have a way more sensitive sense of smell and sniff the air to locate animal carcasses from long distances. Black vultures watch where the turkey vultures go and follow them!



Black vultures usually nest in dead stumps, abandoned buildings and brush piles. They raise 1 to 3 chicks and feed their young for as many as eight months. Black vultures roost in tall trees in large family flocks in the evening, communal living with many relatives. They aggressively keep non-members of the community out of the roost by pecking, biting, wing-thumping, and foot-fighting. Black vultures' vocalizations are limited to raspy hisses and barking grunts as they don't have a syrinx (voicebox). Listen here: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black\\_Vulture/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black_Vulture/sounds)



Like their cousins, **turkey vultures** (*Cathartes aura*) also have featherless heads so they can keep as clean as possible while pulling carrion apart with their hooked beaks. They get their name from their featherless red heads which resemble the heads of wild turkeys. They find their food using their keen sense of smell and as they are nature's clean-up crews, they have strong enzymes to kill off dangerous bacteria and toxins in their guts. Turkey vultures can excrete waste onto their legs, coating them with a white film of strong uric acid. This helps to kill off bacteria on their legs and keeps them cool in hot weather!

Like black vultures, they raise 1 to 3 chicks in a spot scraped in leaf litter or a pile of rotting wood. At Duke Farms, turkey vultures have nested in abandoned sheds and even in the ruins of the Old Foundation! They can be spotted all year round flying with their wings in a dihedral or V shape with a slow, teetering flight style that makes them look like they are rocking in the air. This helps the birds fly low where they can sniff the air in search of a fragrant meal of roadkill.

Turkey vultures are common across the U.S. and all year round. Like their black vulture "cousins", they can't sing either. Their hissing vocalizations sound scary but the worst thing that can happen if you have a run in with either kind of vulture is that it will vomit on you as a defense. By projectile vomiting their acidic stomach contents, they ward off predators and lighten their own load so they can get away more easily. Disgusting yes; deadly, no. Listen to turkey vultures here: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Turkey\\_Vulture/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Turkey_Vulture/sounds)



*Note: All photos courtesy of the Macaulay Library, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY*





## **Additional Resources - Vultures**

All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Turkey vultures and black vultures together for comparison

Fun vulture facts

Cool vulture video from PBS NOVA

World Atlas: The Seven Species of New World Vultures for comparison

## **Additional Resources – Condors**

(This information can be used when working with the Venn diagrams. Condors live in Arizona and California and are critically endangered.)

All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

San Diego Zoo Kids

The Cornell Lab's YouTube playlist of highlights from last year's live camera on a California condor nest



# Put your observation skills to the test!

How are the turkey vulture and the black vulture the same?

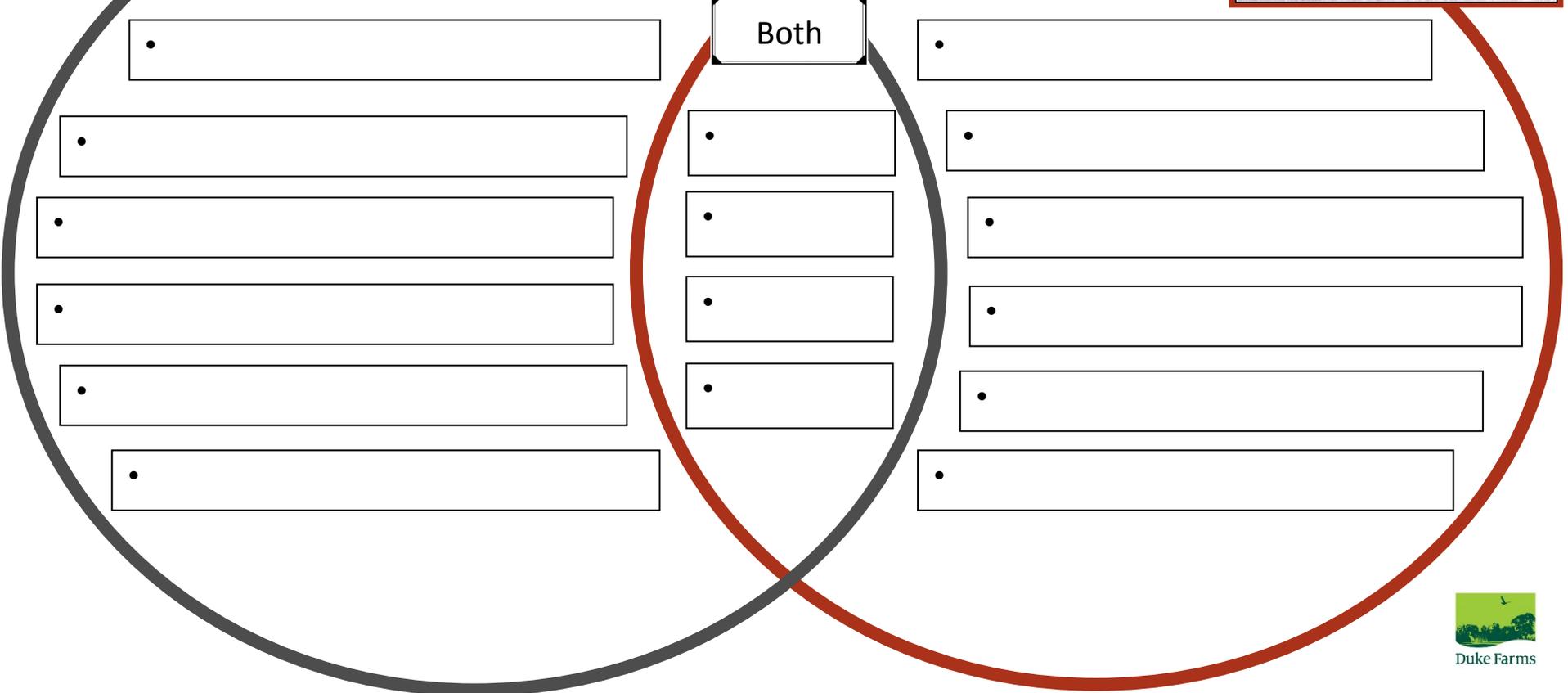
How are they different?



Turkey vulture



Black vulture

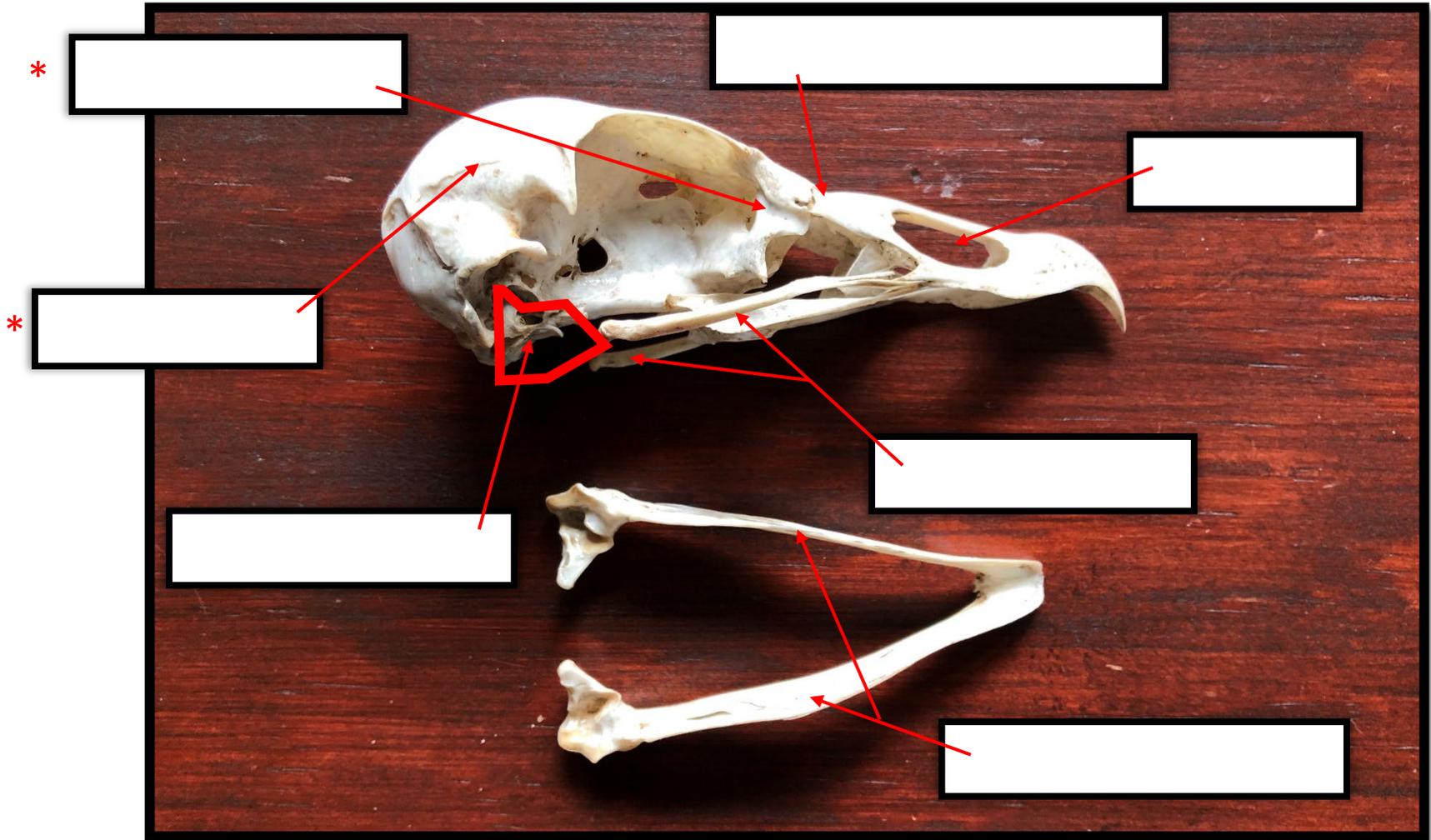


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Can you label this black vulture skull?

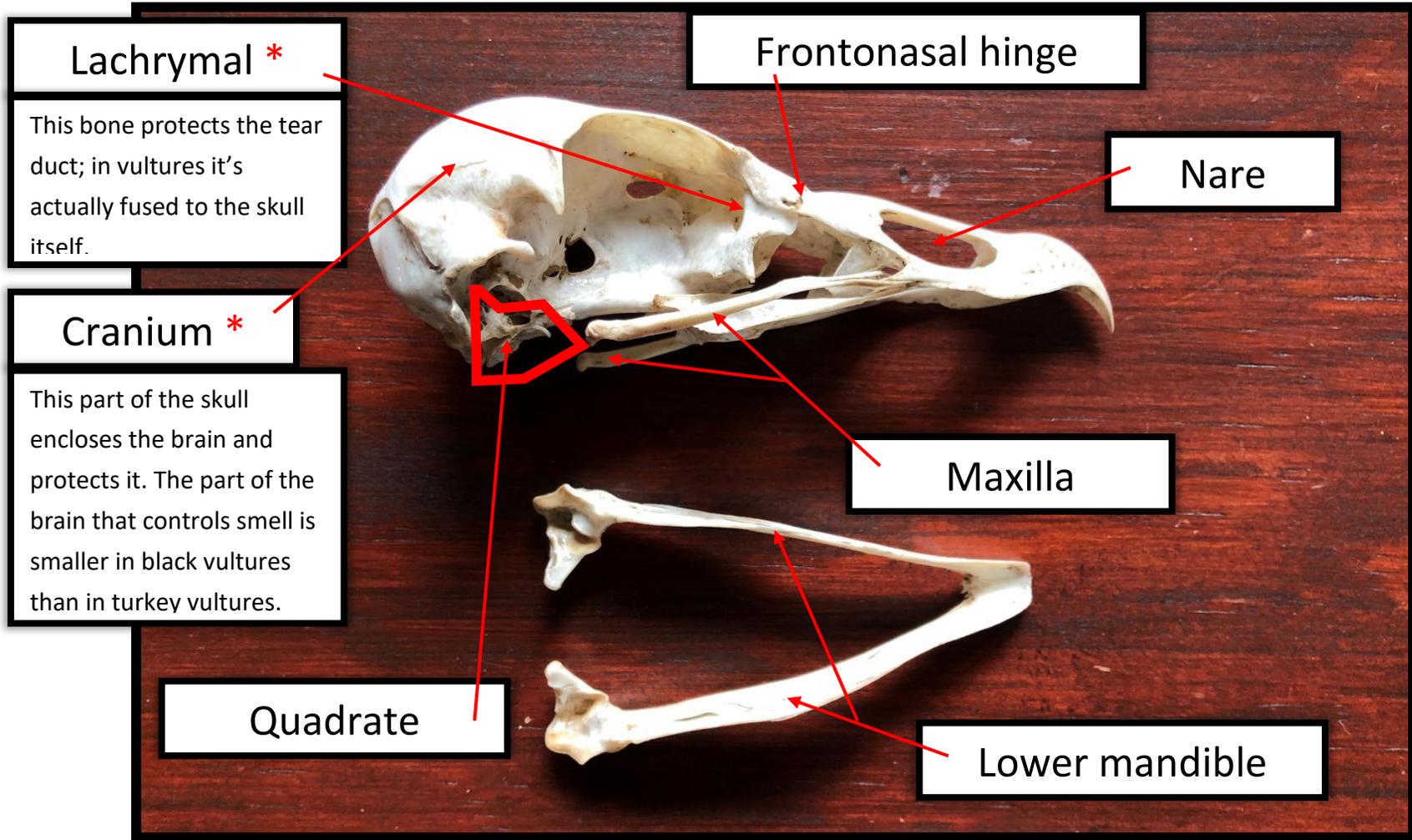
Check out the Black Vulture Skull Tour video and follow along!



Don't forget the bonus terms marked with an \* ! Though not in the video, you can learn more about each on the answer key.

# Can you label this black vulture skull?

Check out the Black Vulture Skull Tour video and follow along!





**Test your knowledge!**  
**Vultures of New Jersey**



Q. Turkey vultures are scavenger birds, not turkeys. Why are they called turkey vultures?

Q. What do black vultures and turkey vultures eat?

Q. Both black and turkey vultures have featherless heads. How is that advantageous to vultures?

Q. How do turkey vultures find their meals?

Q. What special trick does the black vulture use to find their meals?

Q. How is that vultures can eat carrion without getting horribly sick from bacteria and toxins?

Q. A distinguishing feature of black vultures is the appearance of their wing tips. What is it?

Q. Both black and turkey vultures have unique flight patterns. Describe the difference.

Q. Why do vultures excrete waste on their legs?

Q. What defense strategy do both kinds of vultures use when threatened by predators?





## Test your knowledge!

### Vultures of New Jersey

#### Answer Key



**Q. Turkey vultures are scavenger birds, not turkeys. Why are they called turkey vultures?**

A. Because they have red featherless heads that resemble those of wild turkeys.

**Q. What do black vultures and turkey vultures eat?**

A. Carrion or rotting dead animals.

**Q. Both black and turkey vultures have featherless heads. How is that advantageous to vultures?**

A. Because they eat carrion, having featherless heads allow the birds to stick their heads into the bodies of rotting animals and keep themselves as clean as possible.

**Q. How do turkey vultures find their meals?**

A. Turkey vultures use their keen sense of smell and sniff the air for the scent of roadkill.

**Q. What special trick does the black vulture use to find their meals?**

A. As they do not have a keen sense of smell, black vultures often spy on turkey vultures and follow them to food.

**Q. How is that vultures can eat carrion without getting horribly sick from bacteria and toxins?**

A. They have strong enzymes in their guts that break down bacteria and toxins from the carrion.

**Q. A distinguishing feature of black vultures is the appearance of their wing tips. What is it?**

A. Black vulture wing tips look like they've been dipped in silvery paint.

**Q. Both black and turkey vultures have unique flight patterns. Describe the difference.**

A. Black vultures take a few deep flaps followed by glides and turkey vultures hold their wings in a V shape or dihedral and rock in the air.

**Q. Why do vultures excrete waste on their legs?**

A. Their excrement is composed of strong uric acid and by excreting onto their legs they kill off bacteria and use it as a means to cool off on hot days.

**Q. What defense strategy do both kinds of vultures use when threatened by predators?**

A. Projectile vomiting onto predators scares them off or coats them with strongly acidic stomach contents. It also helps them lighten their load to help them get away quickly.



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