

## Valuable Vultures

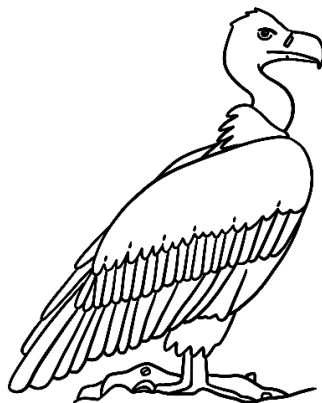
Grade: 3 - 5

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Did you know?**

- Vultures are carnivores that eat carrion almost exclusively.
- Vultures have incredible smell and sight to help them locate their food.
- Vultures can't carry food back to their nests so they feed and then regurgitate food for their chicks.
- The people of Tibet are not buried, instead their bodies are left out for vultures to eat, carrying them to the sky.
- Conservationists use vultures to help identify poaching incidents, because the birds are the first to spot dead animals.
- In Ancient Egypt, vultures were associated with compassion and motherhood—they are great mothers.
- The only continents that do not have vultures are Australia and Antarctica.

Vultures are birds of prey, found around the world, that scavenge for their food. There are two main types of vultures, New World (found in the America's) and Old-World Vultures found in Africa, Asia and Europe. Most vultures share a similar appearance, large bodied with bare head and neck and a hooked beak.



## Valuable Vultures Information & Activity

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Vultures are often disregarded in ecosystems or even seen as dirty, ugly, and unhealthy. This couldn't be farther from the truth and vultures, along with other scavengers play vital roles in ecosystems. They are nature's rubbish disposal unit, keeping areas free of contagious diseases, like anthrax and rabies. These diseases do not affect vultures because they have such strong stomach acid.

To find out why vultures don't get sick eating rotting meat, watch the following short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybnisk5YSz0>

### Poisoning of vultures

Currently, Vultures are being killed at an alarming rate. Poachers view the birds as their enemies, because they can give away where animals have been killed so they are deliberately poisoning carcasses to kill birds. A horrendous case occurred in Namibia in 2013, where a single, poisoned elephant carcass killed approximately 500 scavenger birds, vultures included.

Vultures are also indirectly poisoned when farmers leave poisoned bait out for supposed pest species like jackals.

As a result of these killings, many vulture species are now endangered. As vulture populations decrease, other scavenger species, like rats and feral dogs, numbers increase can lead to increases of disease and pathogen spread.

South Africa is home to **eight species of vultures** and **three are critically endangered**.

Follow the link to meet all our amazing vultures: <https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/landscape-conservation/what-we-do/raptors/vultures-2/>

### **Case Study**

In India, there was a poisoning case where vultures ate cow carcasses poisoned with diclofenac. As the vulture population decreased, the feral dog population increased and along with it rabies. India continues to have one of the highest rates of rabies in the world.

References:

- <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-role-of-vultures-in-the-ecosystem-and-wildlife-conservation.html>
- <https://www.thespruce.com/fun-facts-about-vultures-385520>

## **ACTIVITY**

### **Vulture Tag**

#### **Introduction**

- Start your lesson by talking about vultures. You can show the learners pictures or videos of vultures.
- Allow your class to express how they feel about vultures, be understanding that there will be cultural associations that you may not agree with.
- Maybe show them the fun video of why vultures don't get sick when eating rotting flesh.
- Explain that you are going to play a game showing how vultures can reduce disease in ecosystems.

#### **Game**

1. Divide your class into the following groups:
  - 5 vultures  
*You can identify them as vultures using ribbons/hats/face paint*
  - 2 carcasses  
*You can identify them as carcasses using ribbons/hats/face paint*

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- The rest of the class will be disease vectors.
2. The carcasses need to catch the class members. If caught you are now a disease and you need to pass on your disease by catching someone else, who also becomes diseased and can then catch someone else.

First play the game without vultures and see how quickly everyone got caught and the disease spread.

Then play the game with vultures. It is the vultures' aim to catch the carcass. If they are caught the "carcass" needs to sit out of the game, they can no longer catch other learners/pass on disease.

3. Discuss with learners what happened, how did the vultures help stop the disease spreading?
4. Get the learners to fill in their vulture worksheet.

### **Extension Activities**

Try and figure out as a class how you can change the negative perception around vultures?