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FACTS ABOUT VULTURES

It's time to learn about vultures! Use this fun fact sheet to find out about these super scavengers. Look out for words in **bold** text and see what they mean using the 'glossary' section. Finally, put your new knowledge to the test by answering the quiz questions at the end.

Introduction



There are 23 different species of Vulture, spread around the world. The smallest is the Egyptian Vulture, which weighs around 2kg, while the largest is the Andean Condor, which can weigh up to 15kg, making it one of the largest flying birds in the world.

Vultures are generally **scavengers**, which means that instead of hunting for food, they eat what they can find, which usually involves **carriion** (animals that are already dead). However, a few vultures are also **predators**, meaning that they catch and eat other animals, known as 'prey'.

Vultures are often misunderstood. People seem to think of them as being somehow dirty or disgusting because they eat rotting carcasses. However, by doing this, they are clearing away the decaying meat, which helps to prevent the spread of diseases; the vultures are immune to most bacteria that would kill humans and other animals. You should think of vultures as a nature's clean-up crew doing a very important job!

Types of Vulture

There are two groups of Vultures: "New World" and "Old World". New World refers to the Americas, while the Old World is Asia, Europe and Africa. Both of these groups live a scavenging lifestyle.

Old World and New World Vultures are not related; they evolved separately to do the same job in the environment – eat the carcasses of dead animals. Two unrelated groups evolving the same characteristics for a similar lifestyle is known as **Convergent Evolution**.

Both groups of vultures have evolved to have no or few feathers around the head and neck area. People sometimes think that this makes them ugly, but this is a very useful **adaptation** so that the feathers do not get covered in blood when feeding inside a carcass. Vultures like to keep themselves clean and will often take a bath after they have finished feeding!



New World Vultures



These are the American species of Vultures. There are 5 species of vulture and 2 Condors within this group. Recent studies have shown that these vultures are more closely related to storks, cranes and other water birds, not birds of prey. This is the convergent evolution referred to above. Some of these species of vulture have a very good sense of smell, especially the Turkey Vulture, shown in this picture. Look closely at his beak and you will be able to see a big hole in the

pink fleshy bit – this is his nostril and it goes through the top of his beak. These big holes might explain why he has such a great sense of smell. This species is known to find rotting meat even in heavily wooded areas.

The King Vulture has also been shown to have a good sense of smell and the sense is limited in the other 3 species of New World Vulture (Black Vulture, Lesser Yellow-headed and Greater Yellow-headed Vultures). These 3 other species are usually found in more open areas while the King and Turkey Vultures are usually found in forests.

Old Word Vultures

There are 15 species of Old World Vultures found in Africa, Europe and Asia. The largest species of these Vultures is the European Black (or Cinereous Vulture) followed closely by the Lammergeier (or Bearded Vulture), a vulture which is especially adapted to eat bones!

Other species of birds of prey have powerful feet to catch and hold their prey, whereas the vultures have evolved to have extremely powerful beaks, so over time they have lost the extreme grip in their feet.

There are two species of smaller vulture in the Old World: Egyptian Vulture and Hooded Vulture. These birds tend to hang back at carcasses and pick up very small scraps dropped by the larger vultures. The Egyptian Vulture specialises in eating eggs, and for larger eggs they have learnt to use a rock to crack it, and then they can eat the contents.



One species of vulture that is **omnivorous** is the Palm-Nut Vulture this species feeds on ripe palm nuts as well as carrion.

A Future for Vultures

You might think that a vulture has no predators or enemies. Sadly, it does – and its greatest enemy is human beings. Nearly half of all vulture species are vulnerable or endangered, some critically so, meaning that they are threatened with extinction.

The vulture faces many problems from humans. In some parts of the world, vultures are deliberately killed and used to make traditional medicines. In Africa, for example, many vultures every year are either shot or poisoned by poachers – in one incident, poachers killed 10 elephants for their ivory tusks and then poisoned the carcasses, which killed over 500 vultures. The poachers do this because the vultures flying around above the carcasses will give away their location to rangers who work to stop the poachers.



In India, many vultures die every year after eating dead cows that have been treated with a special veterinary drug called diclofenac (an anti-inflammatory drug). While this drug is used to help the cows, it is deadly to vultures. As a result of a rapid drop in the number of vultures, India has seen a massive increase in the spread of a disease called rabies – as there are fewer vultures to eat the carcasses, they are instead being eaten by wild dogs. Because there is therefore more food for the wild dogs, these dogs are increasing in number. With more wild dogs around, they are spreading rabies; a disease that would naturally have been controlled by the vultures. Vultures are immune to rabies and can digest the meat it is carried in, killing off the bacteria in the process. This shows just how important vultures really are to people.

Fortunately, there is still hope for the vultures. Many people care about them and are committed to their survival. Conservation groups are fighting around the world to protect the areas where vultures live, and to pass laws to control pollution and stop the shooting and trapping of these super scavengers. Captive breeding programmes in zoos and falconry centres are also helping to ensure a future for vultures, like this critically endangered Rüppell's Griffon Vulture hatched at our Falconry Centre in February 2020. Breeding birds in captivity is an important way of making sure that vulture species will survive into the future.



GLOSSARY

Adaptation	An 'adaptation' is a feature or process that an animal has to help it survive better in its environment. The process of adaptation takes place over many generations, which is also known as 'evolution'. When we talk about adaptation, we mean a 'feature' which helps the animal to survive.
Carrion	This means animals that are already dead – scavengers will often feed on carrion. After all, if they find something that is already dead this saves them the effort of having to hunt and kill something else!
Convergent Evolution	This might sound like a complicated scientific term, but "convergent" simply means 'moving together' or 'towards one another'. Convergent evolution means two unrelated species which have evolved or adapted over time to do the same thing or act in a similar way or develop similar characteristics.
Omnivorous	An omnivore is an animal that eats both meat and plant matter, such as nuts, fruits, grass, leaves and seeds. Carnivores exclusively eat meat, while herbivores only eat plants. Omnivores eat both.
Raptors	The word 'raptor' means 'bird of prey'. Not all meat-eating birds are raptors; to be classed as a raptor, a bird must use its feet to catch its prey, just as an eagle does. Other meat-eating birds, like herons or kingfishers, which eat fish, will use their beaks to catch their food – so they are not raptors.
Scavenger	A bird or animal may hunt and scavenge or just scavenge – this means to just eat whatever they can find, rather than going to the effort of catching something. For example, eating carrion – something that has already died.

FACTS ABOUT VULTURES: QUIZ

Test your new-found knowledge about vultures by answering the quiz questions below. When you are finished with the quiz, why not try and write a short story or a poem about a vulture using the facts you have learned, or perhaps draw a picture of one?

1	What are the largest and smallest species of vulture in the world?	
2	What is a scavenger, and what do they eat?	
3	What are the two types of vulture and where do they come from?	
4	Why don't vultures have feathers around their faces and heads?	
5	What is the other name for a Bearded Vulture, and what are they specially adapted to eat?	

6	What is an omnivore, and can you name three examples of omnivorous animals?	
7	How many species of vulture are there? Can you name five different species?	
8	What is the greatest threat to vultures' survival in the wild?	
9	Can you give one example of how vultures' survival is important for people?	
10	How are zoos and falconry centres able to make sure that vulture species will survive in the future?	