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Marcia Davis: Black vultures return to same nest sites yearly



Marcia Davis/Special to the News Sentinel
These black vulture chicks, about three to four weeks old, will remain at their nest site in an old barn for about two months.

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What's not to love about baby vultures? Well, there is that white crusty layer of baby bird poop that coats their legs. And they might vomit on you if you approach too closely. But I can't think of much else.

took me to see active nests with babies. Both nest sites, occupied by black and not turkey vultures, were in barns. And both sites had been used by vultures in previous years.

Other people showed me unoccupied vulture nest sites near their homes that are used year after year during nesting season. These nest sites were in dark recesses of caves and under rocky ledges along river banks.

To call them nest sites is not exactly accurate. Vultures don't build nests. They lay their eggs, usually two, directly on the ground or floor of an abandoned building. Both black and turkey vultures also nest in large hollow trees, large stumps, hollow logs, beneath large rocks and in sink holes. One Tennessee black vulture nested in a duck blind.

Vultures reuse the same nest site year after year. Much of what we know comes from egg collectors who visited the same nests year after year back in the days when collecting bird eggs was legal. A Middle Tennessee collector named H. O. Todd Jr. kept notes on over 300 black vulture nests between 1936 and 1966. His egg collection records showed black vultures used one particular nest site for 40 years. It wasn't the same pair of vultures. Black vultures do have a long life expectancy but they very rarely live as long as 25 years.

The two months or more that young vultures spend at the nest site offer a long time for someone to discover and observe them. Adult vultures coming and going are a clue. It's not hard to see young vultures if you know nesting occurs at the same site every year. All visits near a nest site of any bird should be very brief. Don't interfere with parents coming in to feed their young. Frequent visits might attract natural predators and domestic dogs and cats.

The vulture nest I visited on July 26 contained two babies crouched in a dimly lit corner of a room in an old dilapidated barn. Based on the stiff pin feathers starting to grow on the wings the downy babies were about three to four weeks old. The people who showed me the nest found it about three weeks earlier when the young were tiny chicks.

We looked for the parents but did not find them. A question came up. How do you tell if baby vultures are black vultures or turkey vultures if you can't see the parents? You study the color of the down feathers.

The black skin on the face was bare. This color of down is typical of black vultures. Long cottony down feathers of baby turkey vultures are white.

Young vultures spend at least two months at the nest site while parents feed them. You won't see a nest site with baby vultures littered with the decaying remains of dead prey like you'll find in a hawk or owl nest. There are no scraps of road-killed raccoons, opossums, and deer scavenged by adult vultures along the roadsides. There's only baby vulture poop.

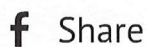
Young vultures eat directly from their parents' mouths by inserting their bill into the parent's open mouth. The parent regurgitates already digested food (sometimes liquid) for the young birds to eat. Older chicks eat solid food. They pitch a fit when they want to be fed. They hiss, cough, flap their wings, bob their head and stomp their feet.

Older birds are fed only two to four times a day.

Black vultures have become more common in East Tennessee in recent decades. Nests with eggs are found from mid-February to mid-July and nests with young from early April until early October. Later nests may be second nest attempts if the first nest fails.

If you see a pair of vultures hanging around an abandoned building with openings to the outdoors or hanging around a rocky cliffside in late winter or early spring take note. There might be a vulture nest somewhere nearby.

Freelance columnist Marcia Davis may be reached at 865-691-1441.



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