

## Photo Description



This image shows a large black bird called a vulture standing on the ground with its wings partially spread. The vulture has a gray, wrinkled head and neck with no feathers, long gray legs, and powerful black wings. You can see it searching on the ground, which is where vultures look for food in nature.

## Scientific Phenomena

Anchoring Phenomenon: Why do some birds have bald heads and search for dead animals?

Vultures are scavengers—animals that eat dead plants and animals instead of hunting live prey. Their bare heads and necks help them stay clean when they eat dead animals, and their strong stomach acid breaks down meat that might be harmful to other animals. This is a special adaptation that allows vultures to fill an important role in ecosystems by cleaning up dead animals and preventing disease spread. Vultures are nature's recyclers!

## Core Science Concepts

1. Adaptation: Vultures have special body features (bare heads, strong beaks, excellent eyesight) that help them survive as scavengers.
2. Food Chains and Ecosystems: Scavengers like vultures are decomposers that break down dead matter, cycling nutrients back into the environment.
3. Roles in Ecosystems: Different animals have different jobs—some hunt, some eat plants, and some (like vultures) clean up what's left behind.
4. Animal Behavior: Vultures use their keen eyesight and sense of smell to locate food sources from great distances.

### Pedagogical Tip:

When teaching about scavengers, start with familiar examples (like how ants clean up crumbs at a picnic) before introducing vultures. This makes the concept less abstract and more relatable to fourth graders' everyday observations.

### UDL Suggestions:

Provide multiple ways for students to engage: Show photographs and videos (visual), play recordings of animal sounds (auditory), and allow hands-on sorting activities where students categorize animals by their feeding roles (kinesthetic). Consider pairing students with different reading levels to read vocabulary cards together.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think a vulture's head has no feathers, while other birds have feathered heads? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
2. How does a vulture help keep the environment clean and healthy? (Bloom's: Understand | DOK: 2)
3. If there were no scavengers like vultures in an ecosystem, what problems might happen? (Bloom's: Evaluate | DOK: 3)
4. What other animals do you know that are scavengers, and what do they have in common with vultures? (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)

## Extension Activities

1. Scavenger Hunt Classification Game: Create cards with pictures of 15–20 different animals. Have students sort them into categories: hunters (carnivores), plant-eaters (herbivores), and scavengers. Discuss why each animal fits its group and what special features help it eat that way.
2. Design a Scavenger Bird: Give students paper and art supplies. Ask them to design their own scavenger bird with adaptations suited to their chosen environment (desert, forest, mountain). They should label body parts and explain how each feature helps the bird survive as a scavenger.
3. Food Chain Diagram Investigation: Provide students with a picture of a vulture and other animals from the same habitat. Have them create a food chain or food web showing how energy moves through the ecosystem, including the vulture's role in breaking down dead matter.

## NGSS Connections

Performance Expectation: 4-LS1-1: Use a model to describe that animals receive different types of information through their senses, process the information in their brain, and respond to the information in different ways.

Disciplinary Core Ideas:

- 4-LS1.A—Animals have different sensory abilities suited to their environments and roles.
- 4-LS1.D—Animal behaviors are shaped by their adaptations and environmental needs.

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Structure and Function—The vulture's bare head structure allows it to function as a scavenger.
- Systems and System Models—Scavengers are part of the larger ecosystem system that cycles materials and energy.

## Science Vocabulary

- \* Scavenger: An animal that eats dead plants or animals instead of hunting live ones.
- \* Adaptation: A special body part or behavior that helps an animal survive in its environment.
- \* Ecosystem: A community of living things and their nonliving environment all working together.
- \* Decomposer: An organism that breaks down dead material and returns nutrients to the soil.
- \* Carrion: Dead animal flesh that scavengers eat.

## External Resources

Children's Books:

- Vultures by Sandra Markle (National Geographic Little Kids First Big Book of Animals series)
- A Day in the Life of a Vulture by Caroline Arnold

- Who Eats What? Food Chains and Food Webs by Patricia Lauber

YouTube Videos:

- "Vultures: Nature's Clean-Up Crew" — National Geographic Kids (2:45 min) — Explains how vultures help ecosystems by eating dead animals. [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=vultures+nature's+clean+up+crew+national+geographic+kids](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=vultures+nature's+clean+up+crew+national+geographic+kids)

- "Animal Adaptations: Vulture Edition" — Crash Course Kids (3:15 min) — Highlights the special features vultures have for their scavenger lifestyle. [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=animal+adaptations+vulture+crash+course+kids](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=animal+adaptations+vulture+crash+course+kids)
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Teacher Tip: This lesson connects beautifully to discussions about biodiversity, animal roles, and ecosystem health. Consider a field study observation of local birds to help students recognize different feeding behaviors in their own community!