As comedian Rodney Dangerfield might say, vultures "don't get no respect." They hang out at garbage dumps and eat dead things. They pick on the weak, both young and old. They are not colorful. They inspire thoughts of evil and death.

Locally, we have black vultures and turkey vultures. Both soar in the sky with the wings up in a V shape. The black vultures have black featherless heads and white wing tip feathers. Their tails are short so their feet extend past the tail in flight. Turkey vultures are slightly larger and have red skin on their head and legs. The feathers on the underside of the wings are gray. When soaring, turkey vulture tails extend past their legs.

Ancient cultures held vultures in high esteem. Some thought them to have special powers. Some thought they were messengers of the Great Spirit. They symbolized fertility in Mayan culture. Romans used them as a symbol of military strength. So how did they get to be the lowest of the low to many local residents? They earned it!

Vultures exhibit some really disgusting behaviors that have helped them survive. When threatened, vultures vomit on the attacker. As bad as it seems, it is a pretty good self-defense technique. Vultures also defecate on their legs to keep cool. Yuck!

Locally, some vultures roost in backyard trees and are causing quite a ruckus. The neighbors say the vultures are not just hanging around giving folks the creeps. They are actually trying to take back the neighborhood and run off the new comers, us humans. Vultures live a long time; 16 years for turkey vultures and up to 25 for black vultures. The problem birds could easily outlast some of us.

These bad birds are pulling the caulking from around windows and skylights. They are ripping up shingles and land on pool enclosures and fall through the screens. They rip open patio furniture cushions and leave quite a mess when they sit on the roof tops all day. Not very well behaved animals.

Vultures have established tree roosts where they congregate and share stories of feast or famine. Roosts are like the local tavern or park where we visit with friends and catch up on local news. Roosts allow less efficient birds to follow successful feeders so they can get a good meal; a pretty good survival technique.

We are not exactly sure why the vultures are enjoying living so close to the humans. Why do they go after vinyl, caulking, or asphalt shingles? What will disturb them and send them off to another neighborhood? What makes certain trees more attractive roosts than others?

These are all questions Dr. Michael Avery wants to know. Dr. Avery is a wildlife biologist working for the US Department of Agriculture in Gainesville. He is currently working on research projects throughout the state to study vulture behavior and specifically, how they are interfering in urbanized areas.

He has successfully moved birds away from telecommunication towers and residential neighborhoods using several methods. One is really interesting. They use taxidermy mounts of dead vultures and hang them in the roost. I guess the other vultures take a hint and figure they don't want to be the next victim. It leads to some interesting questions. Why does it work? Will it work all the time?

At least one neighborhood hopes so. The economic impact is high when you consider the property damage. Emotional damage is pretty high, too. Who wants to be outdone by a big bird?

We need your help. If you know where vultures are currently roosting, please let me know. I need to know day and night time hangouts. If your neighborhood is suffering from vulture damage, let me
You can leave an anonymous phone call if you are embarrassed. Call my Buzzard Hot Line at (321) 697-3000 after hours and only I will know you called. Anyone want to help me with bird counts?

In spite of their bad reputation, vultures are a critical part of our natural system. Vultures prefer carrion, dead animals. They clean up animals hit by cars and feed on livestock and wildlife that die of natural causes. Occasionally, black vultures will feed on young or weak animals, removing them from the ecosystem preventing disease and starvation. The birds recycle nutrients and organic matter to be used by plants. To everything, there is a purpose.

Vultures have a place in our natural world and everything is interconnected. If we displace them from one place, where will they go? Why should we give them any less respect than our national symbol, the bald eagle? After all, they are also carrion eaters and steal food from other birds.

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