

[From Winter 2000 - 2001]

## **An Incredible Air Show**

A large shadow passes over me. I look up to see a huge black bird soar overhead. Even though he is high above the treetops, I can tell his wingspan exceeds my own height of 5'10". Soon he is joined by more of his comrades soaring and circling high in the air. Every so often one swoops down low, just missing the branches of trees and the tips of the tall grasses that grow in a nearby field.

I am awestruck by the aeronautical ballet taking place above me. Over thirty birds are circling overhead, darkening the sky, yet there are no mid-air collisions. Instead they glide over and under, in and out, riding the thermal air currents and almost never flapping their gigantic wings.

To many, this vision may be a thing of nightmares. A flock of vultures circling overhead brings thoughts of dead carcasses and grotesque bald birds. Their wrinkled red heads appear so small and out of place on their hulking bodies.

But these birds play a key role in the ecosystem. The graceful scavengers eat dead and decomposing animals thereby cleaning the environment and reducing the spread of disease. Their remarkable bodies are designed not only for elegant flights, but also to enable them to have such an unusual diet. Their keen senses of smell and sight allow them to locate carrion from vast distances, the bare head is easily cleaned and dries quickly, their hooked beaks allow them to tear their food from the rotting carcass, and their digestive systems are so harsh that no disease causing organisms can survive. Nature may not always be pretty, but she sure knows what works.



If you've missed the vultures, don't worry because they can still be seen soaring over the Eastern Shore long after most other migratory birds have left for the winter. So next time you see a large dark shadow pass over don't run for cover, but run for your binoculars and reserve your seat for an incredible aerial ballet.

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