

Pick Up Your Trash



Estimated number of staff needed:

This activity can be led by 1 person.

Materials needed

“Sick” Vulture stuffed animal
Trash items
Various veterinary tools (syringe plunger, forceps, hemostats, medical tray)
Radiographs of condor chicks
Image of stomach contents
Optional: veterinary dress-up items- scrubs, gloves, face mask, cap

Target audience

This station can be scaled for all ages

Conservation message

- Humans can negatively impact the health of animals
- Keeping our ecosystems free of trash is important for vulture survival

Action Item

Don't litter

Pick up micro trash

R-R-R-R to reduce waste

Directions

1. Explain to guests that you have a very sick vulture.
2. Describe how vultures are scavengers and help clean up our environment.

3. Briefly explain vulture feeding natural history and chick-rearing, which results in them consuming, and feed to their chicks, inorganic trash. Show xrays of impacted condor chick and image of stomach contents
4. Tell guests that surgery is necessary to remove these items, because they are indigestible and could cause death.
5. Invite guests to perform surgery to remove these trash items. Dress up as a veterinarian, use tools to remove trash and place on tray.
6. Discuss the items removed and how we can reduce the risk of vultures coming into contact with it (don't litter, reduce waste, reuse/repurpose, recycle).

Facts

Vultures cannot carry food with their feet, so they gorge and regurgitate for their chicks.

Vultures will consume, and feed to their chicks, inorganic trash from people, which can make them sick.

When vultures eat indigestible trash, it reduces the amount of proper food they can eat, digest, and pass. This can weaken or eventually kill them.

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This vulture stuffed animal was adapted with a small pouch sewn in for a “stomach.”

This stomach can be closed with buttons, which participants can “stitch” back together, or you could use snaps or velcro.

The stomach is filled with trash items that guests can remove with safe surgical tools (forceps, tweezers, hemostats, or play medical tools).

Story Framing

Show guests that you have a very sick vulture.

Have a story: This vulture came was found and brought to a wildlife rehabilitator, where it got an x-ray.

The X-ray revealed it needs surgery to remove impacted trash in its stomach and gut.

Discuss with guests what microtrash is and that we are all responsible for keeping our planet as clean as possible.



Microtrash

Microtrash, or small trash items, are a big deal to wildlife.

Vultures and other animals find shiny or novel objects attractive and not only will eat them themselves, but will also feed to their chicks.

The radiographs are of California Condor chick 482, who whose entire gut was impacted with trash items it had been fed.

The bottom left image is of the stomach contents that were successfully removed from chick 482.

As you can see, this chick was fed glass, bottle caps, soda tabs, screws pieces of metal, and other inorganic, indigestible, and potentially fatal man-made waste.

These images were taken at the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Litter impacts scavengers

Vultures natural scavenging behavior leads them to opportunistically eat whatever they can find. Vultures eat the "trash" leftover by carnivores after they've had their fill-picking a carcass clean and cleaning our environment. But when they eat our trash, they're making themselves sick.

Talking Points

Early Childhood

How are these animals the same or different from you?

Vultures take a lot of care to raise their young, and parents are responsible for finding food for their chicks.

Ages 6-8

How can you help vultures?

Don't litter, pick up trash, even microtrash, and properly recycle or dispose of it.

Ages 8-10

Why do vultures matter to you?

Vultures help keep our ecosystems clean and healthy.

Ages 9-12

What connections do people in the community have to vultures?

Vultures may be common in your area, and may be eating your litter.

Age 12-Adult

How are the health of vultures and the environment interconnected?

Vultures reduce the spread of diseases. Parts of the world that have lost their vultures due to poaching or poisoning are seeing increases in zoonotic diseases.

More Facts

Like other scavengers, vultures are attracted to human litter because of the bounty of food available. They can inadvertently or intentionally eat inorganic items that look like food.

Vulture chicks are especially susceptible to illness or death when consuming these "food" items brought by parents because their smaller bodies have a more difficult time passing these objects, causing impaction.

Resources

Full size images from this lesson are available in the Resource section of the Raptor TAG website.