

## Black Vultures Kill Skunk in Mississippi

Dena D. Dickerson

Department of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi College  
Clinton, MS 39058

Many references to the food of Black Vultures (Coragyps atratus) mention occasional attacks on animals. However, specific instances of such attacks are rarely described. Black Vultures have been seen attacking domestic chicks, newborn calves, kids, piglets, lambs, turtles, opossums, and skunks (Figgins 1923, Sprunt 1946, Lovell 1947, Roads 1936, Hagopian 1947, Hamilton 1941, Mrosovsky 1971, McIlhenny 1939).

On 15 March 1983, while driving with Terry L. Vandeventer south of Clinton, Mississippi, on the Natchez Trace Parkway, I noticed a full grown skunk (Mephitis mephitis) moving leisurely across a recently mowed field which also contained about 12 cows. Since it is common to see skunks at almost any time of day in grassy fields as they search for insects, I might not normally have taken notice. However, this skunk was surrounded by about 10 Black Vultures.

The vultures were on the ground and encircled the skunk, remaining about 5 m from it. We approached the group on foot and the vultures hopped away a short distance, although none left or retreated very far. The skunk appeared to be undisturbed and continued eating insects. As soon as we got back into our car, the vultures returned to their positions surrounding the skunk. We then left, but returned within 45 minutes, at which time we found the vultures devouring the skunk. The respectable skunk odor prevented close inspection!

McIlhenny (1939) reported Black Vulture predation on skunks, noting "...as soon as eight or ten [Black Vultures] have assembled, one will attack the skunk from the side. The skunk usually discharges its musk as soon as it is attacked, and this seems to be the signal for a general attack by the assembled vultures, and they will quickly kill and eat it." He also witnessed similar attacks on opossums. McIlhenny associated the attacks he observed with prolonged dry weather; our weather had not been particularly dry.

After this instance, I attempted to learn whether such attacks are common in this area. Neighboring farmers have not seen any predation on skunks, but have witnessed similar attacks on piglets on many occasions. Throughout the literature, in most instances the presence of the placentae near the newborn pigs appears to have been the original attraction for the birds. This does not, however, account for all instances of predation by Black Vultures.

#### Literature Cited

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