

## Early Description of the Black Vulture on the American Continent

RODOLFO SALAS-AUVERT<sup>1,3</sup> AND A. VILORIA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biology, Laboratory of Microbial Ecology and Biotechnology,  
University of Zulia, Maracaibo, Venezuela; and

<sup>2</sup>Biology Museum, University of Zulia, Maracaibo, Venezuela

The biology of the Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) has been well documented (e.g. Stewart 1974, McHargue 1981, Rabenold 1986), although recent authors have not reported early records of this bird on the American continent. An interesting account of the Black Vulture was written by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (a notorious official chronologist of the Spanish conquest of America) in "Summary of the Natural History of the Indies" (1526, Volume I, Chapter XXXIX, Toledo, Spain). A complete revision of this work was published by Avalle-Arce (1963), which enabled us to document what appears to be the first published mention of the Black Vulture from the New World. The textual translation of the chapter on the Black Vulture, which is entitled "Fragrant Chickens" is as follows: "There are many Spanish chickens here and they increase in number because they do not allow their eggs to be removed from under their wings; these have originated from chickens brought to the Americas [from Spain]. Other than these, there are some fierce chickens, big as turkeys, black in the head and part of the neck with some dark gray, although not as dark as the rest of them, and the less dark areas are not the plumage, but the hide. Their meat is bad and tastes awful, and [they] are very voracious and eat much filth, dead Indians, and animals. But they smell like almizcle [an animal

secretion used in certain cosmetics and perfumes] and very well, while they are alive. After they are killed, they lose their odor and are good for nothing, except the feathers are used for darts and arrows. They can withstand a great blow, and a crossbow must be powerful to kill one if it is not hit in the head or one of its wings broken. They are very inopportune and like to be in or near town to eat filth."

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<sup>3</sup> E-mail: rsalas@iamnet.com

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## Can Passerines Synthesize Vitamin C?

CARLOS MARTÍNEZ DEL RIO<sup>1</sup>

Department of Zoology and Physiology, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071, USA

L-gulonolactone oxidase (GLO) is an enzyme essential for the synthesis of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) that has been lost in several mammalian and avian lineages. Among mammals, the enzyme is present in

all major lineages except bats (Chatterjee 1973; Birney et al. 1976, 1980; Jenness et al. 1980), anthropoid primates (Pollock and Mullin 1987), and guinea pigs (Chatterjee 1973). In mammals, the presence of GLO seems to be a phylogenetically conservative trait that is lost rarely and is unlikely to be recovered once lost

<sup>1</sup> E-mail: cdelrio@uwyo.edu