

Black Vultures and Vehicle Damage



What is the problem?

The black vulture, the gray-headed cousin of the turkey vulture, is causing damage to vehicles--often trucks and SUVs --parked at boat ramps. Windshield wipers, sunroof seals, and rubber or vinyl parts are at particular risk. Most of the time, perching black vultures do little or no damage. However, in some cases, the destruction can be extensive. The vultures can tear out rubber seals, peck pieces out of truck bed liners, and scratch paint with their claws.

Why are they “attacking” vehicles?

The quick answer is that no one knows for sure. Black vultures are primarily scavengers that play an important in our local ecosystem, cleaning up dead and decaying animal carcasses. Rubber and vinyl certainly isn't a part of their natural diet, and they only rarely eat any of it. Typically, the material is simply discarded after it's ripped from the vehicle.



A “committee” of black vultures perches on vehicles parked at Monroe Lake’s Fairfax SRA boat ramp. ©Monroe Lake, 2012

Some have theorized that the smell of a certain chemical in the rubber might be attracting the birds. However, studies have not supported this, and it seems an unlikely answer given that black vultures have a terrible sense of smell.

Others have suggested that the behavior is social in nature. Perhaps the birds are simply filling time with their “committee” (a term used to describe a group of perched vultures), much like humans sometimes engage in what may seem like meaningless activities while hanging out together in a group. Another possibility is that it could be connected to a ritualistic feeding behavior engaged in by young black vultures.

The reasons why black vultures choose to attack one vehicle over another are similarly obscure.

Where is this problem occurring?

Black vultures are currently only found in Southern Indiana. While damage caused by black vultures can occur anywhere in the southern half of Indiana, we are seeing more frequent problems at Monroe Lake and Brookville Lake.

Is there a solution?

A variety of tactics have been tried to discourage black vulture attacks on vehicles. The most common tactic is to discourage black vulture committees from congregating at key locations.

Thus far, problems have been concentrated at boat ramp parking lots. Staff members have removed snags (dead trees) to make areas less attractive for perching and have used “harassment” techniques, including firecrackers, laser lights, and pyrotechnics, to chase vultures from the area. While “harassment” can be effective over short periods, it isn't a good long-term solution. It is time consuming for staff and can create an unpleasant environment for visitors.

Lethal solutions to the problem have been offered for consideration. However, black vultures are occupying their natural habitat and are playing an important part in that ecosystem (when they aren't attacking vehicles!). They are also a protected species under the Migratory Bird Act, which severely limits control by lethal means.

How can I protect my vehicle?

If you have a cover for your vehicle, use it. You can also rig an improvised cover using tarps and bungee cords, taking particular care to cover exposed rubber and vinyl parts. If your vehicle sustains damage from black vulture activity, your recourse is to file a claim with your insurance company. You are also encouraged to report incidents to the property office) to help the property more accurately track and assess the problem.

