



# King Vulture

*(Sacorhamphus papa)*

The king vulture is a medium-sized New World vulture with broad wings and a short tail. Its plumage is primarily white and buff with black flight and tail feathers and a gray collar at the base of its neck. It has the strongest bill of all of the New World vultures. The almost-bald head of the king vulture is extremely colorful. It has an orange wattle, similar to that of a turkey, extending out just below the nostrils.

## Habitat & Diet

The king vulture feeds on all types of carrion, which it locates with its keen eyesight. This species cannot locate food by smell, but follows turkey vultures, which can locate food by scent. When feasting on large carcasses, the other vultures wait for the “king” to tear open the thick hide. The king vulture, once found in Florida, is extirpated from that state due to human encroachment.

## Fascinating Facts

The ancient Mayans believed that the king vulture messenger of the gods, flying between heaven and New world vultures have evolved two interesting methods of removing bacteria that may grow from the dead food they eat. They spread their wings in the sun to catch the ultraviolet rays and they defecate on their feet to utilize the high uric acid.



**Height:** 32 inches  
**Weight:** 9 pounds  
**Wingspan:** 4 feet  
**Habitat:** Densely forested tropical lowlands  
**Range:** Southern Mexico through So. Argentina



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## Status

As a result of human disturbance and development, the habitat of the king vulture is decreasing rapidly. This vulture is imperiled in many areas of its natural range and is recognized by conservationists as a threatened species. Despite the ability of the vulture to tolerate biological toxins, it suffers from exposure to chemical toxins and lead poisoning.