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SEASONAL ABUNDANCE AND FLIGHT BEHAVIOR OF VULTURES IN CENTRAL GEORGIA

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Abstract: To assess seasonal changes in population size and flight behavior of Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*) and Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), they were censused in 30-minute counts about 9 times per month from August 2007 to December 2008 in Macon, Georgia. Flight elevation, measured with a clinometer, was determined for each bird, and the number of birds per flock was also counted. Vulture activity was measured at 3 times of day (0700, 1100, and 1600 hrs, EST) in additional 15-minute censuses during fall 2008. While both species were permanent residents, Turkey Vultures were twice as abundant as Black Vultures. Peak population densities occurred in late fall through winter (November – February) for both species, and were characterized by high variance. Though Turkey Vultures were sometimes present in flocks of almost 100 birds during winter, mean flock size was greater for Black Vultures (3.6) than for Turkey Vultures (2.8), which were more likely to forage alone than in groups. Turkey Vultures rely on their strong olfactory sense to locate food and fly lower than Black Vultures, which have a weaker sense of smell and are known to follow other vultures to food. Differences in flight altitude and flocking are probably related to inherent differences in social behavior, including stronger social bonds among Black Vultures and greater competitive ability for food at carcasses.