



Dear METRO Editors,

My name is Alicia Eastham; I am writing on behalf of the staff at Second Chance Wildlife Center in regards to an article in the Washington Post Metro: Ravaging a Neighborhood's Peace, by Amit R. Paley, Friday, January 20, 2006. As Mr. Paley seems to be unlisted on washingtonpost.com, we will bring our concerns to your attention. SCWC is the largest wildlife rehabilitation center in the area and we treat an estimated dozen vultures a year, therefore we feel we are in a position to offer a few corrections to the article.

First and foremost, vultures are not primarily carrion eaters - they are exclusively carrion eaters. Under no circumstances will any vulture ever hunt live prey or try to eat something that is not dead. In fact, due to their small beaks, most carcasses have to be partially decomposed or eaten by other scavengers in order for a vulture to consume it. They are without the "weapons" necessary for an animal to hunt - their feet are very similar to a chicken's and their beaks are used as eating utensils. Their most effective defense mechanism is to vomit on whatever has cornered them but they are far more likely to fly away than stand and vomit. In regards to XXXXXXXXXX (a woman quoted extensively in the article) concerns for her dog, it is simply illogical to suppose a vulture would ever approach a live dog for any reason, and if the dog were to chase it, it would surely run/fly away. [Note: This citizen was misquoted in the article and was only concerned about the droppings and the damage the birds were causing.]

Secondly, some of the facts presented in the article were incorrect. Vultures are not classified as raptors (birds of prey); they are actually classified in the stork family. They do not fly in "packs" but in roosts, which are actually large extended families that sleep and forage together. No mention was made of the fact that vultures are one of the best avian parents and that multiple generations may help to care for each year's young. Both species of vultures in this area use their keen sense of smell to locate carcasses, in fact they are only birds in this area who possess a sense of smell. The illustrations used are also inaccurate. Only Black Vultures hood themselves by raising their neck feathers and no vulture has red eyes.

Finally, here at SCWC we take issue with the implication that vultures are menaces to society. They do not "ravage" or "terrify" anyone who has the slightest understanding of their physiology or natural history. If the vulture population did not grow with our highways and urban sprawl, road kill and its bacteria would overwhelm us. Vultures are gentle, social, harmless animals that provide an important service to our communities. Certainly, we can understand that their fecal matter is unsightly, but that is the worst of their effects on our environment and a little rain will wash that all away.

It is the job of every wildlife rehabilitator to educate the public and provide accurate information. We believe that journalists share that responsibility.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Alicia Eastham  
Clinic Supervisor  
Second Chance Wildlife Center