

“Lesser Yellow-Headed Vulture”



Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures occur from eastern Mexico south through Central America, and sporadically in South America east of the Andes and south to Uruguay.

It probably locates food largely by smell, as do the other species in the genus, which is rare among other avian species that typically have no sense of smell.

The numbers of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures in southern Tamaulipas (Tampico wetlands) have been declining since the 1960s. This species may serve as an important indicator species whose presence reflects the overall fitness of tropical wetland ecosystems.

Factors resulting in the decline of wetland areas can have a negative effect on the population and distribution of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures. Such factors include draining of wetland areas for agriculture and development and also climate change altering rainfall patterns.

While many vulture species in the New World have healthy populations, vultures worldwide are in significant decline. In Asia, vulture populations of three species of vultures declined by nearly 99% between 1992 and 2000. Scientists found the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, being used in veterinary medicine with cows, was ingested by vultures scavenging on cow remains, causing kidney failure and ultimately death. Without vultures, feral dog populations grew out of control.

Today, millions of Indians are bitten by dogs creating more cases of rabies per capita than any other nation in the world. Despite this crisis, diclofenac has been approved for use in Italy and Spain since 2013. Another recent study on the veterinary use of a different drug, Fenbendazole, indicates potential toxicity to the remaining vultures in India.

The Avian Conservation Center led a cooperative research study in 2007 that determined diclofenac did not have the same negative effects on New World vultures, proactively addressing a major environmental issue. Vultures remain a vital part of ecosystems around the world filling an important niche in the environment. Their growing absence in other parts of the world creates significant human health issues that will impact generations to come.

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