

# Black Vulture

## *Coragyps atratus*

Located at the northern edge of their North American range, Black Vultures are rare and very locally distributed residents within southern Ohio. They were recorded from a total of 31 locations in 11 counties during the Atlas Project. Most vultures were observed within a fairly narrow band of counties, extending from Adams and Brown north through Highland and Ross to Hocking and southern Fairfield. Elsewhere on the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, there were two reports from Scioto County and an extralimital sighting in Belmont County. In the southwestern corner of the state, small numbers were recorded near the Little Miami River in Warren County and at Hueston Woods State Park (Preble and Butler counties).

Most observations were of soaring vultures that provide no indication of their breeding status; these reports were assigned to the possible category. Active nests with eggs or young were discovered at single sites in Fairfield, Adams, and Brown counties and at Hueston Woods State Park.

While these sightings accurately portray the current distribution of Black Vultures within Ohio, they are a poor indication of the size of this population. Peterjohn (1989a) estimated that the statewide population probably totalled 70–100 pairs. This population was nearly equally divided between the vultures occupying Hocking, southern Fairfield and eastern Ross counties, and those found in Brown, Adams, Highland, and western Ross counties. Records during the Atlas Project apparently indicate that the numbers found within the latter counties may have been slightly underestimated, and the statewide population may actually be in the range of 100–125 pairs.

Originally spreading into Ohio at the turn of the century (Peterjohn 1989a), this population has not changed dramatically in size and distribution during the past 50 years. Hicks (1935) cited breeding from 12 unspecified southern counties and estimated that the “total number of breeding pairs may not exceed 100”. During subsequent decades, a population of Black Vultures became established in northeastern Licking County where as many as 90 were tallied during the winter of 1957–1958 (Greider and Wagner 1960). Black Vultures were reported from this area through the winter of 1981–1982 (Hall 1982) but not during the Atlas Project. The lack of recent records may indicate that this population has disappeared.

Black Vultures are occasionally found in other southern Ohio counties. They are casually reported from Hamilton County where several nesting attempts have been confirmed (Austing and Imbrogno 1976). There are also scattered sightings from the Ohio River counties between Gallia and Belmont, although no recent breeding records have been documented from this area.

Nesting Black Vultures prefer secluded locations to raise their young. They are normally solitary breeders and are not known to exhibit any territorial behavior (Palmer 1988). Ideal nest sites are inaccessible caves or rock ledges that are safe from terrestrial predators and humans. However, such sites are limited and most

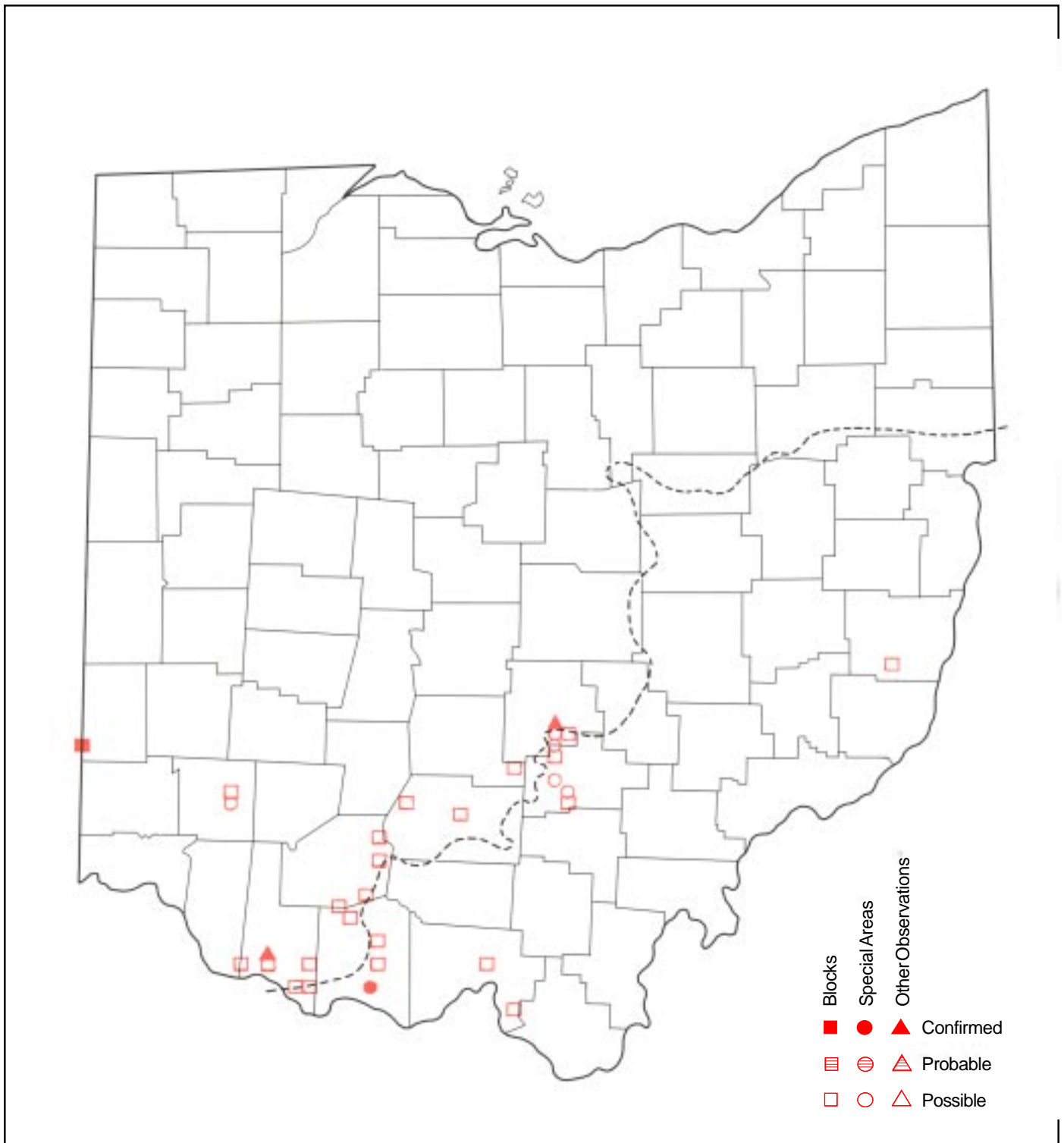
nests have been discovered on the ground in woodlands, usually in the middle of dense thickets or within hollow trees and logs. A few pairs have nested in abandoned buildings. The number of pairs utilizing ground nests has increased in recent years. Since these ground nests are more vulnerable to predation, Black Vulture breeding success may have declined, which could contribute to their decreasing populations in some states (Palmer 1988).



Tim Daniel - Division of Wildlife

Very little information is available on the breeding biology and chronology of Black Vultures in Ohio. Studies by Thomas (1928) and Greider and Wagner (1960) were limited to observations of single pairs. Their choice of nest sites is similar to those described elsewhere in their range. Egg laying normally begins during March, with the earliest published egg date of March 13. These young hatch during the second half of April, spend approximately 70–80 days in the nest, and fledge during early July. They will renest if their first clutch is destroyed. Greider and Wagner (1960) reported a nest with eggs on the exceptionally late date of July 1. These eggs did not hatch until July 24. The chicks were still in the nest on August 22, and if they successfully fledged, probably did not leave the nest until early October.

Thomas (1928) was one of the first people to witness the breeding behavior of Black Vultures. Their habits may seem disgusting to people, particularly the regurgitation of carrion to feed their young. However, he found them to be attentive parents during the lengthy process of raising their young.



**Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region**

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	–	–	–	–
Till Plain	271	2	0.7	8.7	–
Ill. Till Plain	46	8	17.4	34.8	–
Glaciated Plateau	140	3	2.1	13.0	–
Unglaciated Plateau	212	10	4.7	43.5	–

**Summary of Breeding Status**

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3.0%</b>
Confirmed	1	4.4%
Probable	–	–
Possible	22	95.7%