Birds in the Backyard

Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*)

The Egyptian Vulture is a small vulture, easily identified by its yellow-orange bare face and whitish body with black flight feathers. The wedge-shaped tail allows for identification in flight. The beak is long and curved at the tip, and the neck feathers are long. Juveniles (to the left in the photo above) are dark brown with white and blackish markings.

Distributed across the Old World, Egyptian vulture populations, including those of the Indian subspecies, have declined drastically over the decades. Vultures are ecologically important as scavengers, and have died from the toxicity of drugs like diclofenac, which was widely administered to livestock and, therefore, present in carrion. Vultures near urban areas are also exposed to various chemical toxins in garbage dumps.

Egyptian vultures are often, but not always, monogamous, often pairing with the same mates across breeding seasons. Tool use in the form of using pebbles to break large eggs is known in this species in Africa but not elsewhere. Egyptian vultures were held sacred in ancient Egypt, used as a symbol of royalty, and protected by law, giving rise to its other name, Pharaoh's chicken. Fun fact: the yellow-orange face is obtained by assimilating carotenoids by feeding on ungulate faeces!

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