



Cormorants spread their wings to dry them



Juvenile Double-crested Cormorants may be identified by their brownish plumage and the light tan on their necks and chests

## **Brunswick Wildlife**

### **Double-crested Cormorant: Nobody's Favorite Bird**

Everyone has a favorite bird...maybe several favorite birds. I have never heard anyone claim the cormorant as their favorite. This species, however, deserves closer inspection.

Most likely you have seen them many times at marinas, docks, or flying off shore. We have plenty of opportunities to watch them closely, including major roosts.

A few bird species are considered “junk birds” by most birders. Pigeons, House Sparrows, and starlings are notable examples. The Double-crested Cormorant though is no junk bird. Early in my birding career, an experienced birder pointed out the cormorant's turquoise eye. Thus began my respect for and enjoyment of watching cormorants.

There are six species of cormorants in North America. In addition to the Double-crested, there are three on the West Coast, the Neotropical found in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Mexico, and the Great Cormorant from the Northeast.

The Double-crested Cormorant is the most abundant and widespread North American cormorant and the only one occurring in large numbers in the interior in addition to the coasts. Their coastal range includes the Aleutian Islands in Alaska down to Mexico, the Canadian Maritimes to Florida, and the Gulf Coast.

This large waterbird has a long neck and a long, hooked bill. Adults are all black and in breeding season they have a small double crest of black feathers over their eye. They may swim low in the water with just their heads and strong, thick necks out of the water.

Once threatened by DDT (like so many other species), cormorant numbers have greatly increased since this chemical and others were banned. Unfortunately, they are now in conflict with humans due to their impact on fisheries and aquaculture. Also, commercial

and sports fishermen have suggested that cormorants are an important cause in the collapse of some fish populations. Data supporting these claims, however, are few.

Cormorants make flat, bulky nest of sticks, seaweed, and other materials plus they usually pick up flotsam, such as rope, fishnet, and plastic debris to include. Nests are lined with grass or grass-like material.

Gregarious birds, cormorants nest in colonies on the ground, on cliffs, or in trees. Colonies range in size from a few pairs to many thousands. Colonies are easily found given the visible whitewash and, if you are unfortunately downwind, the strong stench of the guano and rotting, regurgitated fish will assist you.

My most surprising observation of cormorant nests was at Nebraska's Crescent Lake NWR. About twenty cormorants were nesting in a dead tree, which also included a dozen Great Blue Heron nests (which is normal). In the middle, however, was a Red-tailed Hawk nest. Trees, even dead ones, are at a premium on the grasslands.

Cormorants generally forage alone, in shallow, open water or close to shore. When foraging on schools, cormorants may form cooperative flocks, swimming in lines to herd the fish.

Cormorants usually eat fish; however, other aquatic animals, insects, and amphibians may be taken when available. The fish are usually schooling species that are relatively slow-moving.

Most prey is taken underwater. Cormorants dive from the surface, chase their prey while submerged, and grab it with their hooked bill. Underwater, they are propelled by strong totipalmate feet (four toes are webbed together).

During winter, the Lower Cape Fear hosts more cormorants because we receive an influx of birds from the north. These birds move south while open water is available. Note that a few Great Cormorants may visit in winter so watch carefully for these rarities.

In late March 2007, I first witnessed a "must-see" Greenfield Lake event. Double-crested Cormorants by the hundreds flew in for roosting, starting an hour or two before sunset.

Those coming in with the wind at their backs seemed to fall out of the sky then bank into the wind, finishing with a landing flare for touchdown. Those coming in against the wind made powerful low-level approaches and then rode the lift of the wind into their landing.

As the trees began to fill and space was limited, newcomers were treated to hostile bill-snapping and aggressive behavior until the original occupant understood the incoming bird was not attacking. Then all settled peacefully and began to preen...until the next returnee landed. I left around 6:30 PM with an hour of daylight left and many were still streaming in.

This spectacle is probably available for most of the winter. Over the next few months, if you are caught on the wrong side of the "Green Monster" in the late afternoon, check it out.

John Ennis



**An incoming juvenile was rudely received by an adult**