

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*



Folk Name: Coalgoose, Carmal, Sea-raven

Status: Migrant, Winter and Summer Visitor/Resident

Abundance: Very Common in peak migration

Habitat: Lakes, rivers, ponds

Over the past century, the status of the Double-crested Cormorant has changed quite dramatically in both Carolinas during breeding season, migration, and winter. During this same period, the public's attitude regarding cormorant breeding sites has radically changed as well. This is despite the fact that this bird has been documented nesting in the Carolinas at relatively few locations.

T. G. Pearson discovered the first confirmed colony in North Carolina in 1898, and, at the time, this was the only known nesting colony of Double-crested Cormorants north of Florida. In 1904, Pearson wrote a special article for *The Charlotte Observer* titled "A Colony of Cormorants" describing his recent three-day exploration of this colony located on Great Lake in Craven County. In his article, Pearson noted that the nests of what were then called the "Florida" Cormorant were of the "greatest interest" to ornithologists and deserved special protection. His team counted 121 nests built in the boughs of 28 cypress trees, a decline from the 150 nests they had originally counted in 1898. While climbing into the trees to photograph the nests, Pearson recounted: "the young birds, excited at our approach, showered down into our pockets, our cameras, and our necks, immense quantities of half-digested fish." When, his crew accidentally dislodged one young bird, it was quickly snapped up by an alligator. They immediately went to the bird's rescue and, after heroic effort, were able to secure it and return it to its place in the tree: "our last view of it was as it stood on the nest calmly picking itself and drying its black down in the sunshine."

The Great Lake colony remained the only known breeding site north of Florida until 1953 when a small group was found at Lake Ellis, half a mile away. The Great Lake colony died out around 1960, and, by 1973, only 12 nests were present at Lake Ellis. In the 1980s, Double-crested Cormorants began to slowly colonize inland lakes in both Carolinas. In 1985, three cormorant nests were discovered on Jordan Lake near Raleigh, and the first nesting colony ever confirmed in South Carolina was discovered on Lake Marion. At least two additional South Carolina nesting sites were confirmed by the late 1990s. In 2012, one additional nest site on a coastal island was confirmed in North Carolina resulting in a grand total of only four nest sites confirmed in the entire state in 100 years. Ironically, this most recent nesting confirmation was greeted with trepidation instead of calls for protection. Today, the Double-crested Cormorant is considered by many to be a nuisance animal and a potential threat to



other types of nesting colonial waterbirds.

Outside of these few breeding sites, the Double-crested Cormorant was historically an abundant winter resident along the coast of both Carolinas. Birds that bred far to the north wintered here each year. Prior to the 1970s, only a trickle of cormorants had been reported wandering inland to the Piedmont or mountain regions. One of North Carolina's earliest inland reports is of a flock recorded moving through Anson County on May 24, 1916:

Local ornithologists were puzzled in determining the family relationship of a visiting bird that was captured here [Wadesboro] yesterday morning. During Monday night a flock of birds was seen passing over the city and it is thought that the bird captured is one that became lost from his companions. The name of this unusual bird is Cormorant, sometimes called a sea-raven or coalgoose. It has a long beak, crooked at the end, with a pouch in the lower bill. It is very vicious and has brought the blood from several who attempted to be friendly with it. Its web feet are of an oblong shape, long legs and neck, with wings that will measure three feet from tip to tip.

One of South Carolina's earliest inland reports comes from Spartanburg. Gabriel Cannon found a Double-crested Cormorant on June 11, 1944, swimming on Zimmerman's Lake. The bird came so close that Cannon could "see the hook of the bill without glasses."

In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, inland reports of Double-crested Cormorants in the Carolinas multiplied rapidly as the cormorant population experienced a period of "spectacular growth" across much of the continent. Inland sightings of cormorants steadily increased through the 1990s including increasing numbers of both wintering birds and non-breeding birds that began to

spend their summers on large inland lakes. In 1997, one amazed North Carolina birder wrote “Just how much can the [inland] numbers continue to rise?” Records of cormorants in the Central Carolinas dramatically illustrate this change.

The Double-crested Cormorant began to show up regularly in the Charlotte area in 1983. Heathy Walker and Paul Hart discovered five on Lake Norman on April 14, 1983, and, later that year, Hart and Walker found two on the Catawba River on 29 December. Two days later, a cormorant was a highlight of the Charlotte CBC, adding a new species to the Charlotte count list. The following spring, observers found the first cormorant ever seen on a Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 4, 1984. Three years later, David Wright recorded the region’s first summer cormorants when he documented three on Lake Norman, which remained for most of the season. Since the 1980s, the Double-crested Cormorant has been a regular migrant in the Central Carolinas. In recent years, the numbers of transient birds, winter residents, and summering birds has increased. Now, during spring and fall migration, flocks of 800 or more cormorants can be found moving along the Catawba and Yadkin rivers.

Recently, nesting has been suspected in the region. In 2012, John Brzorad, a biology professor and waterbird specialist at Lenoir-Rhyne College, found evidence of Double-crested Cormorants possibly breeding in a nest colony with Great Blue Herons on Lake Hickory. That June, the *Hickory Daily Record* reported:

Brzorad spotted three adult birds and four juveniles, who look to be about a month old. Although he thinks it’s likely the young were born in the nests on the lake, he cannot say with certainty they were, since he didn’t see the birds as chicks.[Brzorad said,] “It’s likely they’re breeding here.”

If nesting is confirmed, this would be the westernmost nest site in the Carolinas.

Unfortunately, the Double-crested Cormorant has now become the subject of a contentious conservation debate in our country. The bird has become so abundant on freshwater and coastal waterways throughout much of North America that now, in many areas, it is considered to be an overly-abundant pest species. It has recently been called America’s “feathered pariah” because four decades of “explosive” population growth has put the fish-eating cormorant at odds with fish farmers and commercial and sport fishermen across America.

In response to numerous complaints, the federal government and several states have issued depredation permits in an attempt to reduce the cormorant population. In 2014, South Carolina harvested almost 12,000 cormorants under this new policy. However, a court order issued in 2016 put a stop to cormorant hunting in South Carolina until additional research on the birds’ impact in the state can be documented.



Cormorants digiscoped during the 2015 Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. (Lenny Lampel)