

CORMORANTS



There's little, if anything, remarkable about the appearance of the double-crested cormorant. Colored mostly black, save for a yellow-orange bill, the long-necked bird stands wings outstretched to dry itself after a dive. The bird, common to North Dakota and often seen perched in bunches in bare, inundated trees, was given the unflattering name of "crow duck" by European settlers.

But even the homeliest of creatures can inspire. The cormorant is an excellent diver, which it does often in depths of 10-20 feet of water in search of fish. Fully-webbed feet and a streamlined body enable it to dive deeper if necessary. The bird has sharp vision both below and above water, and its feathers absorb moisture to help it stay submerged for a half-minute or so. One bird can eat about a pound of fish per day.

Cormorants were nearly extinguished by DDT – the same pesticide that poisoned many raptors, including bald eagles, in the 1960s and 1970s. A ban on DDT, along with other protective measures, has helped the double-crested cormorant rebound. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers today's population estimate of around 2 million birds as a historic high.

Many anglers, both in North Dakota and elsewhere, would contend the birds have rebounded too well, to the point where the fish-eating cormorants, with seemingly insatiable appetites, have made a considerable dent in game fish populations on some waters. Others would argue that the majority of fish cormorants eat are those not targeted by anglers.

Observations by North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists indicate cormorants are opportunistic and if they discover a fishery that provides easy pickings, they can significantly reduce fish populations, particularly on smaller waters with recently stocked trout

or other young game fish.

In some states, anglers and resort owners feel certain in their finger-pointing, and wildlife managers are culling cormorant populations even this summer. In Minnesota, for example, sharpshooters are in the process of shooting up to 4,000 cormorants that roost on an island in Leech Lake, one of the state's top walleye lakes. Fishing at Leech isn't what it once was, and cormorants are the suspected culprit because their local population has grown from around 500 to well over 4,000.

Cormorants are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and in North Dakota their nests and eggs cannot be disturbed, nor can the birds be captured or shot without a depredation permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. When there is a depredation problem, the responsibility falls to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services. This agency also has to recommend action before the USFWS is able to act on a request for a depredation permit.

In 24 other states, however, the Fish and Wildlife Service has established a public resource depredation order that allows state agencies to conduct certain cormorant management activities, such as egg and nest destruction and shooting, without a specific depredation permit.

Double-crested cormorants aren't the only birds that target fish, but cormorants and white pelicans are probably the two most visible fish-eating birds in North Dakota because they are often seen in flocks. A flooded tree turned black by cormorants, or a group of pelicans hunting prey as a team stands out.

A number of other birds – great blue herons, mergansers and bald eagles, to name a few – rely on fish as a food source too, but are more solitary in their quest.

In 1993, the drought of the late 1980s and early 1990s in North Dakota finally loosened its grip, setting the table for a number of animal species in the state. When the spigot opened and rains returned, tens of thousands of new acres of water followed, providing excellent spawning habitat for some fish species. Vegetation, suddenly flooded after standing high and dry for years, provided ideal spawning habitat and nutrient-rich conditions for northern pike and yellow perch. Instead of only about 100 lakes, the Game and Fish Department was presented the task of managing more than 300 waters.

All this was good news, of course, for double-crested cormorants. Not only were there more waters and more prey, but also expanded habitat for the birds themselves. Across the state, thousands of trees that were once standing nowhere near water became inundated and died. Void of leaves, the dead trees provided ideal nesting habitat for a bird known to have strong reproductive success. Those same trees also provide loafing and roosting perches.

It took several years for cormorants to start taking full advantage of the expanded habitat, but over the last five years or so the population upswing is significant. The whispers – and some shouting – have begun as anglers and many fisheries biologists, who are noticing the bountiful black birds, are claiming that cormorants eat too many game fish.

Across North Dakota, cormorants are often blamed for reduced game fish populations in some lakes. In some cases, the implication could be valid. Even if cormorants diving on a lake or river are eating mostly fathead minnows, they're judged guilty by association.

Anglers are calling for action, perhaps similar to what has been taking place on Leech Lake in Minnesota. North Dakota Game and Fish biologists also agree that some type of action is warranted in specific areas.

Outside the state, however, some in the wildlife and fisheries profession, and some of the public at large, believe just the opposite; that cormorants are part of the natural world and should not be killed just because they are doing what they need to do to survive.

Here's a look at some of the factors concerning whether to leave double-crested cormorants alone, or to somehow intervene to control the population if evidence supports such a move.

One Side

- Double-crested cormorants, like a long list of other fish-eating animals, have a rightful place in the wild.
- Cormorants are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the same program lauded by hunters who pursue ducks and geese.

- Cormorants are not physically capable of eating walleye and northern pike that are of "keeper" size for anglers.

- Studies have shown that cormorants eat a number of fish species, many of which are not considered desirable by anglers.

- If the concern is over the number of fish being eaten by birds, the blame could rightfully go elsewhere as studies show white pelicans can eat four times as many fish as cormorants.

- Ridding cormorants from one fishery – by force or other means – simply pushes the problem elsewhere as the birds will move to next best feeding ground. To effectively address the high cormorant population, the effort would have to be statewide.

The Other Side

- Cormorants don't discriminate between walleye fingerlings, fathead minnows or a someday whopper yellow perch. They eat what's available and easily caught, and many times it's a fish species that anglers pursue, such as perch, young trout and bluegill.

- One study demonstrated that a single cormorant can eat a dozen fish in a day. That's a lot of fish when you consider the cormorant population in North Dakota and elsewhere has increased significantly in the last decade.

- Cormorants can thwart efforts by fisheries biologists stocking put-and-take waters with hatchery-raised trout. In North Dakota this spring biologists feel cormorants, along with some pelicans, ate most of the trout stocked in some lakes before anglers had a chance to fish for them. These stocked trout cost about \$1 apiece, which means cormorants are taking many thousands of dollars worth of fish each year.

- Cormorants are colonial nesters and have been known to out-compete other bird species relying on the same type of nesting habitat.

- Cormorants attracted to fish hatcheries eat fish raised for the enjoyment of anglers around the state. In the past couple of years, cormorants and pelicans have wiped out bluegills that were being held at hatchery ponds prior to transfer to other lakes.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.