

# Book of Birds - Vol. 1

Gilbert Grosvenor  
Alexander Wetmore

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(*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

Average Length, Thirty Inches

In the sounds and shallow bays dotting the southern coast of the United States, the channels are marked with many stakes and buoys, and these are popular perching places for the double-crested cormorant. When a boat approaches, the big black bird leans forward, raises his wings, then hesitates as if loath to leave his comfortable position. When finally he launches forth in a clumsy, awkward fashion, he seems unable to keep from striking the water before he can get well under way. With heavily pounding wings he departs to seek another perch, or perhaps comes to rest at a distant point on the surface of the bay.

Sometimes cormorants take food fish from nets, but their usual diet consists of fish of no known value to man. On several occasions I have collected sculpins and other nonedible varieties which excited cormorants have disgorged in my presence.

For many years fishing clubs situated along streams flowing into the Gulf of St. Lawrence offered a standing bounty of 25 cents a head for every cormorant brought to them. Clubmen and their guides contended that the birds were destroying salmon. At length the Geological Survey of Canada obtained the services of one of the Dominion's ablest ornithologists to study the food of cormorants in these waters. Numbers of them were killed and the contents of their stomachs examined. Not a single bird was found to have eaten a salmon. Instead, many sculpins, "a few herrings, one capelin, an eel, and some tomcod were brought to light"; consequently the bounty offers were withdrawn.

When flying, the cormorant's neck is stretched to its fullest extent and its feet point out straight behind. While the bird is swimming on the surface, the large, webbed feet paddle alternately, but when it is pursuing prey under water both of the feet strike backward at the same time. As with all cormorants and pelicans, the feet of this bird have all four toes united by a web. The crests on the side of the head, which give this species its name, disappear soon after the nesting season begins, and on many of the birds they are never very conspicuous.

While I was visiting a colony of cormorants in North Carolina, a downy young bird fell from a cypress limb along which it was clambering. With waving wings it struck the water lightly and began swimming away. An alligator gave chase, and twice I thought the bird had been caught; but, by diving, it had in both cases escaped the enemy's jaws. We replaced the bird among the limbs of its cypress tree.

Of the Florida cormorant, Arthur H. Howell writes: "The abundance of the birds has led

coast of a series of racks to catch the excrement of the birds, which is collected and used for fertilizer. During the greater part of the year long lines of cormorants may be seen flying in single file along the coast, many of them alighting on the racks, and others in the sea to fish. Their food is obtained by diving from the surface or swimming under water. They are able to remain under for long periods, and when in pursuit of their prey they sometimes use both feet and wings in swimming and are then capable of great speed. The birds, when alarmed, utter a hoarse, guttural croak like that of a bullfrog."

This species is divided into four subspecies, as follows: double-crested cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus auritus*), Florida cormorant (*P. a. floridanus*), white-crested cormorant (*P. a. cincinatus*), and the Farallon cormorant (*P. a. albociliatus*).

The combined geographic territory frequented by these four varieties gives to the species a range extending from Alaska, James Bay, and Newfoundland to Florida and Mexico.

In many places the birds build their nests on the ground or on rocky cliffs, but in Maine, as well as in North Carolina, Florida, and other southern States, trees are selected.

### European Cormorant

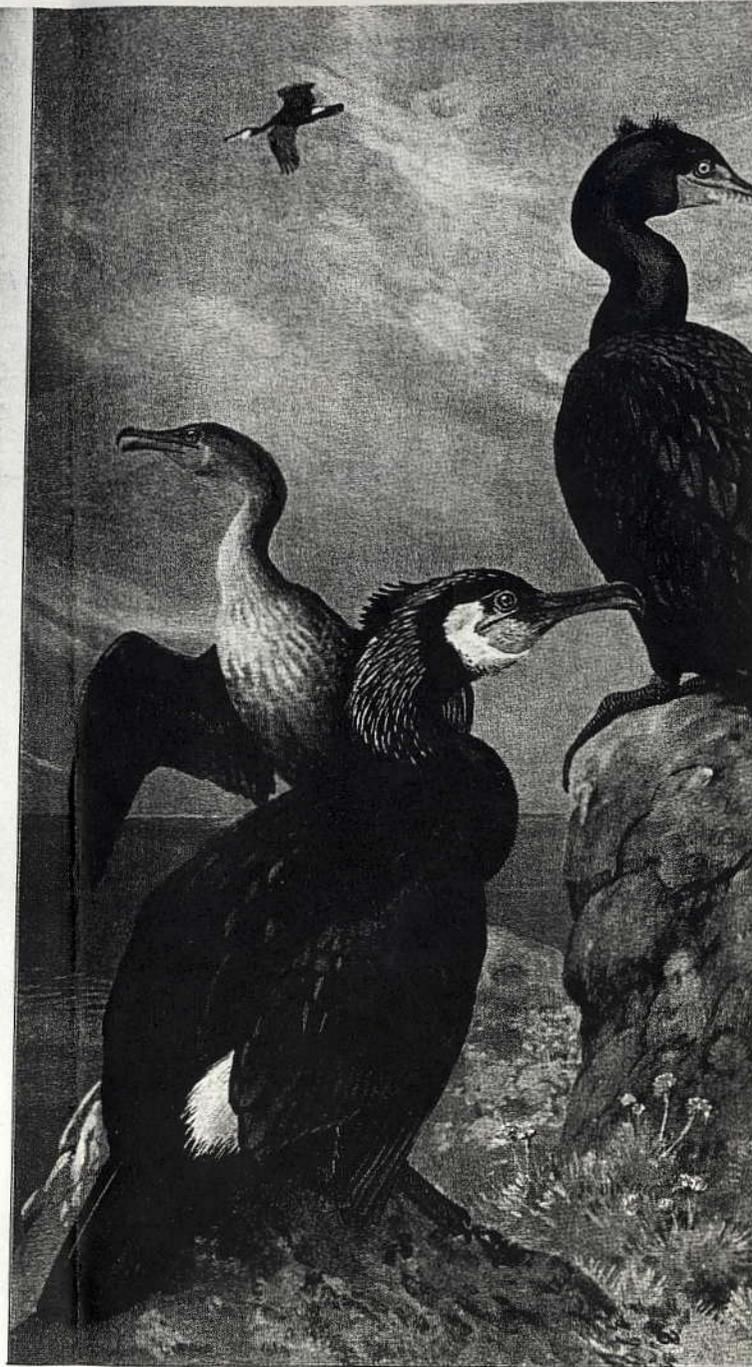
(*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*)

Average Length, Thirty-six Inches

The European cormorant is seen in the United States in winter, but even during that season one may expect to find it only along the Atlantic coast north of New York. It is casual south to South Carolina. Once known as the "common cormorant," it is no longer common on the Atlantic coast.

Although the bird at one time probably bred as far south as Maine, the most southern colony known today is on an island off Big Bras d'Or, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. In company with Dr. Gilbert Grosvenor, in the summer of 1930, I examined this assemblage of one hundred or more birds and photographed them on their nests at close range. They inhabited a high, rocky cliff and their nests were placed on the narrow ledges. They kept careful watch of their eggs, for there was a pair of great black-backed gulls in the neighborhood, to which fact the breeding terns of the island from time to time gave vociferous testimony. The colony is now protected and is increasing.

Other forms of this cormorant occur in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. I found these cormorants common on the Farne Islands, off the east coast of England, in 1922, and, two years later, along the Scottish coast. Their croaking notes and their nesting and feeding habits do not differ materially from those of other cormorants.



### MAN HAS ENLISTED THE CORMORANT'S AID IN FISHING

The Japanese and Chinese put a cord, ring, or strap on the neck of each swallowing the fish. The two head tufts of the adult Double-crested Cormorant in winter, and are not present on the immature bird (upper left). The handsome shown in breeding dress (lower left) nests from Nova Scotia to Greenland.

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