



Double-crested cormorant (Alan Stankevitz)

Cormorant Wars

By Pamela Eyden

On the Upper Mississippi, double-crested cormorants are most noticeable in the fall, when they migrate from their nesting areas in the Great Lakes basin to their wintering grounds along the Gulf Coast. These large, black, long-necked, hook-beaked water birds are interesting to watch — hundreds crowding the branches of island trees or flying low over the water in long strings. After a few weeks they're gone.

That's why it's hard to understand the rumors of war coming from other parts of the country. Mass slaughters, protests from catfish farmers and a proposed new hunting law are part of a broader picture of anger and antagonism against cormorants that has been growing for two decades.

In April 1999, three guides and seven fishermen in Watertown, New York, pleaded guilty to the slaughter of 2,000 double-crested cormorants on Little Galloo Island in eastern Lake Ontario. The 10 were fined \$2,500 each and sentenced to six months probation. Some say they were treated like local heroes after they left the courthouse.

In June 2000, about 500 cormorants and several dozen ring-billed gulls and chicks were shot on a National Wildlife Refuge in Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay, Michigan. No one has yet been apprehended.

On the other side of the law, Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., intro-

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duced a bill this summer that would allow states to establish hunting seasons on double-crested cormorants. The bill passed the Resources Committee on September 20, but did not come to vote in the House before the election recess.

Peterson is not afraid to speak plainly about cormorants: "Personally, if the cormorants were wiped out, I would not think that was a bad thing," he said. "I don't know what useful purpose they serve." (Associated Press, 6-8-00)

(Peterson did not return calls from *Big River* regarding his proposed legislation.)

Why the violence and rhetoric? Some anglers and fish farm operators see the cormorant as a direct competitor for valuable fish, and they've become frustrated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for protecting a bird they say is destroying businesses. The FWS points to evidence that cormorants are not responsible for an excessive loss of game fish. Cormorants, they say, are being blamed for a lot of other environmental changes that affect fish populations and "catchability." Nonetheless, the complaints are growing louder.

In November 1999, the FWS published a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and national management plan for the double-crested cormorant, which would address many of the concerns. The fact that the House Resources Committee chose not to wait for the EIS and the management plan illustrates its growing impatience.

Delta Buffet

Flamboyant news stories refer to cormorants as "lean, mean fishing machines," and "a menace with voracious appetite." What and how much do they eat?

There are six species of cormorant in North America; all are excellent divers and fishers. The double-crested cormorant is the most common. They mature in four or five years, live 20 to 30 years, and eat about a pound of fish per day, although they'll take twice that if it's available. Biologists call them "opportunistic piscivores," which means they aren't choosy -- they'll eat whatever's plentiful and easy to catch.

In the Upper Mississippi they eat golden shiners, gizzard shad, bass, pike, redhorse and suckers. In Lake Erie, they eat freshwater drum in the spring and young gizzard shad in the fall — the same fish, in the same proportions as those found in trawl catches. They

also take young fish released from hatcheries into the Great Lakes. They eat bait fish grown on Minnesota baitfish farms. They eat catfish from catfish farms.

The FWS in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that cormorants take from three to seven percent of the annual catfish crop in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. Some people say the bite is bigger than that. According to one estimate in the *Delta Farm News*, the state of Mississippi hosts about 65,000 cormorants during the winter. Each bird consumes an average of 1.5 pounds of fish, which includes 0.6 pounds of catfish, each day for 120 days. At \$.75 per pound, that's a \$5.85 million dollar loss in Mississippi alone.

Recognizing the damage cormorants can do to young fish confined in shallow pools, the FWS granted a depredation order to 12 states, allowing fish farm operators to kill cormorants stealing fish. However, this measure hasn't solved the problem and now operators are protesting the expense. One catfish farmer in Arkansas said he hires five full-time workers to drive three trucks and two four-wheelers, shooting 100 cases of shotgun shells a year. On top of that he has to repair the pond dikes and bury the birds.

"Cormorants cost us about 2 of the 6 cents per pound of profit we make -- that's the bottom line," said Carl Jeffers of Top Cat Fishery in Portland, Arkansas (*Delta Farm News*).

From the cormorants' point of view, though, they are just doing what they've always done; it's the landscape that's changed. Before the collapse of the cormorant population, from DDT and other organic pesticides in the 1960s, cormorants stayed close to the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast, feeding on native fish. In the last few decades, the forests and backwaters were turned into hundreds of thousands of acres of catfish ponds. The birds still roost in traditional sites, but they fly many miles just to catch dinner in the catfish ponds.

Also, there are a lot more cormorants around than there were a few years ago — in fact, more cormorants in some areas than ever before. Cormorants have rebounded well from their near-extinction. The Great Lakes group has grown by 22 percent or more per year. From a low of 89 breeding pairs, they have grown to 93,000 pairs, according to the House of Representatives' report accompanying the hunting bill. The FWS agrees that the cormorant population is at historic highs because of protection, the banning of DDT and ample

food in both summer and winter areas. This has created a number of hot spots in the north.

No cormorants nested on Lake Oneida, in upstate New York, until 1984. By 1997 about 250 pairs nested there. Despite other environmental changes in the lake (the zebra mussel invasion, less algae, etc.), the birds are blamed for destroying the walleye and yellow perch. The Oneida Lake Association wants them removed. "Until the last decade, cormorants have never been a major factor in the lake's food web. Their feeding has caused tremendous damage — not only to the lake's economy, but to our region's economy."

Green Bay, Wisconsin, has become another hot spot. In 1970, concerned volunteers gathered utility poles and got the county to plow an ice road onto the lake so they could set up nesting platforms for the remaining 48 pairs of cormorants. The grader crashed through the ice, but the platforms went up. Today, the area hosts 14,000 nesting pairs of cormorants.

In the Upper Mississippi valley, however, there aren't nearly as many cormorants as there were before DDT. About 2,500 pairs nested in the Upper Mississippi River region before DDT; there are 700 pairs today. In a good year, 3,000 to 4,000 cormorants migrate through the river valley. This is nothing compared to the flocks of 80,000 to 90,000 that "blackened the sky" earlier in the century.

Sport or Revenge

The FWS expects to release its Environmental Impact Statement in February 2001, after several years of research and public meetings. After a period of public comment, the Management Plan will be released. Options include: allowing more depredation permits, training hatchery fish to feed deeper in the water, destroying eggs at specified nesting areas, and harassing cormorants to keep them from nesting or roosting in troubled areas.

"A range of alternatives will be considered in the EIS, one of which will be hunting," notes Steve Lewis, FWS nongame bird coordinator for the Upper Mississippi. "Until we complete that process, we cannot formulate an opinion on the pending legislation."

A hunting solution, as proposed by Rep. Peterson's bill, does not seem plausible. The idea is not even popular among hunters. Dave Otto, a sports columnist in Green Bay, summed it up this way: "Much as I dislike cormorants ... Sport hunting is not the way to go. A lot of people, including this scribbler, feel you should kill only game you

will eat. I can't think of anything more distasteful than a bowl of cormorant stew," (*Green Bay Press Gazette-News*, 6-11-00).

"If there is a hunting season, hunters will be killing cormorants because they hate them. That's the wrong reason to hunt. It smacks of the bad old days when bounties were paid on everything from wolves to rattlesnakes."

Cormorants who prowl fish farms will probably be treated differently than cormorants who catch wild fish in open waters. Shooting cormorants just because anglers resent the competition doesn't make sense to a lot of people.

"Even if double-crested cormorants were shown to have a major impact on perch populations, it is doubtful that a control program would be socially acceptable," said an unidentified Michigander in response to a FWS Survey. "It would be like advocating the control of hawk and owl populations so more pheasants are put in the hunter's bag."

Gabe Ranallo, who has fished on the Mississippi River near La Crosse since 1965, echoes this sentiment. "I caught a ten-pound northern in Lake Onalaska the other day, and there was an eight-inch sauger inside it. That northern probably has more impact on other game fish than cormorants do ... Why single out cormorants? Why not shoot pelicans? I haven't heard complaints about pelicans either, but a lousy fisherman is always going to blame something — usually it's the weather, but if he's having a really bad day he might blame the cormorants."

Steve Lewis, FWS nongame bird coordinator for the Upper Mississippi, wonders how much of the cormorant's problems is due to its appearance. "People will tolerate pretty white birds that have poems written about them longer than they'll tolerate an ugly, black bird with a hooked beak and a prehistoric, villainous look."

"Instead of focusing on all the migratory birds that are declining, said Lewis, "I get to spend my time on the one that's doing very well." — *Pamela Eyden, December 2000*

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