

The shags are back



Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

Two species of cormorants nest in the province. The great cormorant stays throughout the winter while the smaller double-crested cormorant tends to migrate out in the autumn and return in the spring. Cormorants are unaffectionately referred to as shags, a related species that lives in the eastern Atlantic and whose name was applied by early mariners to the similar cormorant species in North America.

Compared to a double crested cormorant, a great cormorant is somewhat larger and thicker proportioned in the head and body – somewhat reminiscent of a raven – crow comparison. The double-crest has a tiny seldom-seen two-tiered crest at the back of the head and sports an orangey throat pouch. The great cormorant has a yellow throat bordered by white feathers. Immature great cormorants appear dark on the chest and light on the belly, whereas the young double crest shows an inverted pattern of light breast and dark belly.

Though cormorants appear black, when viewed at close range in good light, their plumage reflects brilliant iridescent blues and greens. An eye-catching behavioral feature of cormorants is that they can often be seen with their wings fully extended when roosting. Cormorants are among the few avian species that lack natural oils that waterproof their plumage and have to resort to air-drying techniques.

Range, habitat and diets

Great cormorants have a coastal range in eastern North America from Labrador to the Carolinas, whereas the double-crest ranges from Labrador through the central US to the Gulf of Mexico and across North America to the Pacific coast from the Aleutian Islands to Mexico. In the North Atlantic, great cormorants also nest inside the Arctic Circle in Greenland and in Norway and some overwinter there through the 24-hour dark period. Consistent with these distributions the great cormorant lives a completely marine existence while the double-crest occupies both marine and fresh waters.

A large colony of double-crested cormorants was established on island in Gull Pond at Alexander Bay Station near Gambo, and a substantial colony of double-crests is on the Watch and Chain Islands off Labrador. Two to three hundred great cormorants nest on a small island near Bird Island in Placentia Bay, and a mixed colony of great and double-crested cormorants is at Brierly Cove near Cape St. Mary's.

The trouble with shags

Cormorants like most seabirds are fish eaters, and this trait has not endeared them to fisherman of either the commercial or sport persuasions. Cormorants have endured a lot of bad press. Unfortunately, most of it is unwarranted, but as has often been the case with seals, fishermen often have no tolerance for species they view as potential competitors for fish and on whom they can easily attribute blame for overfishing.

A study of cormorants in PEI by Vicki Friesen [formerly at MUN, now at Queen's University] and others indicated that while cormorants depleted fish around their colonies, their prey were small flatfish, cunners and sticklebacks not the salmon or trout that they are often "blamed" for depleting. As cormorant populations are limited by their food supplies, their populations will be held in check by the fish they can capture. It's nature's way.

The shags are coming back

Cormorant populations are robust and growing around the island's coasts and in Labrador. Cormorants were likely always fairly common widespread seabirds in Newfoundland and Labrador. Circumstantial evidence for this contention is the abundance of islands, islets and coastal locations around the province with the place name Shag. For instance, the Canadian Wildlife Service seabird data base lists about 30 Shag Islands and headlands.

Increasing and expanding populations of double-crested cormorants in the Great Lakes and Gulf of Maine are no doubt producing new immigrants to Newfoundland and Labrador. Reduced prosecution has also favored population growth, and the removal of

gillnets following the Atlantic salmon and northern cod fishery closures has reduced entrapment and drowning in fishing nets.

So the shags are back, as one aspect of avian natural history appears to be repeating itself.

Birds in area and around province

A pair of little egrets that were in Fairhaven during May was photographed by Gene Herzberg. After an extended absence, the gray heron was recently seen again in Little Heart's Ease.

Richard Northcott reports a great blue heron, an evening grosbeak, an eastern kingbird and the usual catbird from Ramea.

In Portugal Cove, a lovely bittern flew across Western Gully Road from the marsh near Whitaker's farm. Thank heavens that not every wetland in our community have not been filled in or destroyed as the town council has shamefully permitted at Butler's Pond.

Gannets are chasing herring and feeding in Gooseberry Cove (Nora Lippa) and off Cape Race where a long-tailed jaeger and a humpback whale were seen on 29 May (Tony Power). A rare immature tundra swan was in Portugal Cove South at the end of May (Dave Sheppard).

Seth Bennett noted the first tern arrivals on 20 May in Conception Bay South. A pair common terns and a pair of nesty ring-billed gulls have been hanging about Burton's Pond on the MUN campus. One of the gulls had a bright orange wing tag numbered 1008. I am checking with Canadian Wildlife Service to find out the bird's origin. In Witless Bay, kittiwakes, murrelets and puffins are laying their eggs on Gull Island, where singing song sparrows are patrolling their nesting territories.

Two willow ptarmigan in stunning nuptial plumage stood out atop a roadside snow bank at Cape Freels reflecting a mismatch of day length, physiology and weather following the May 24th weekend blizzard. The storm generated a congregation of necessity on the windswept Musgrave Harbour beach where robins, savannah sparrows, starlings and ring-billed gulls foraged together in the seaweed.

Mourning doves are in the area. In early April, Pam Williams had group at her feeder in St. Philips, and in late May Carolyn Mayo noted one at her feeder by Neary's Pond

Bird sighting of the month – at Manuals-long Pond, Linda Gaboriko found a junco inside her kitchen trying to exit via a closed window. As she went to release the bird, a merlin was hovering on the other side of the glass trying to grab the junco! So a glass window that usually wreaks havoc with birds in this case resulted in a hungry hawk and a wayward junco to live another day.

Keep looking outside and in. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 895-2901(h), 864-7673(o), 693-5305(c).