

# *Brandt's Cormorant*

*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*



Photo by  
<https://regenaxe.com/2018/06/02/brandts-cormorants/>

## **Physical Description:**

Brandt's cormorants are large birds (between the size of a crow and a goose) at 27.6 to 31.1 inches (70-79 cm) in length with a wingspan of 42.5 inches (108 cm). They weigh between 49.4 and 95.2 oz (1400-2700 g). They have long, slender necks. Adults are almost solid black with a purple sheen on the head. Juveniles are buff-brown and black with a paler neck and breast that forms a V shape on the breast. Birds of all ages and phases have light-colored cheek patches. During the breeding season, adults have a blue patch (called a gular pouch) at the base of the bill, in front of the cheek patch. Brandt's cormorants have a shorter tail than any of the other cormorants found in Washington. They have medium-sized dark bills which are blunt or hooked at tip.

## **Natural History:**

Brandt's cormorants can be found in inshore coastal waters, especially areas with kelp beds; also large bays and occasionally estuaries or coastal lagoons. Along the Pacific Coast, this cormorant is a common resident of wave-washed rocks and offshore waters. Sociable at all seasons, it is often seen flying in long lines low over the water. Groups roost together on rocks near water, and feed in flocks offshore, often associating with other seabirds. Brandt's cormorant populations are stable to declining. Breeding population estimates range from 100,000 to 151,200. Legal protection from eggging and hunting may have led to increases in populations from 1900 to 1970.

## **Reproduction:**

The main breeding range of Brandt's cormorants is between California and Washington. The breeding season occurs between March and July. They nest in colonies on the ground including cliffs, islands, and offshore rocks. Male Brandt's cormorants choose the nest site and display there to ward off rivals and attract mates. Displays include drawing their heads back with their blue throat pouches extended and bills pointed upward, spreading their tails, and fluttering their wings; also thrusting their head forward and downward in rapid repeated strokes. The nest is a mound of seaweed, eelgrass, and/or algae, cemented together by droppings. Most of the nest material is obtained underwater. The male does most of the gathering while the female does most of the building. The pair may use the same nest every year, adding to it annually.

**Life Cycle:**

Female Brandt's cormorants usually lay three to six pale blue eggs, single brooded. Incubation is by both parents although the length of period is unknown. Details of parental care and ages at first flight and independence are also unknown. Some breed first at two years old, but most not until older. Cormorant hatchlings are naked and helpless. Both parents care for the chicks, feeding by regurgitation, brooding chicks when cold, and shading them when hot. Chicks often congregate in groups called crèches once parents stop attending nests continuously, but they return to their own nests to be fed.

**Range:**

Brandt's cormorants breed along the Pacific Coast from Alaska and southern British Columbia southward to Baja California and western Mexico. In the main part of their range, from California to Washington, the cormorants rely upon food sources produced by the upwelling of the California Current. In the non-breeding season, the effects of this current diminish, and Brandt's cormorant populations redistribute along the coast from southern Alaska southward to Baja California and western Mexico, wintering wherever food is locally available.

**Diet:**

The Brandt's Cormorant diet consists predominantly of a wide variety of fish, including herring and rockfish, as well as shrimp, and crab. This cormorant, sometimes feeding in groups, can dive deeply from the surface and pursues fish underwater, propelled by its powerful webbed feet. The bird snatches prey with its bill, rather than spearing it.

**Threats:**

Persistent challenges to the Brandt's cormorant include pesticides and oil pollution. During the incubation period, Brandt's cormorants are vulnerable to disturbance from fishing, diving, boating, and even visitation for research or educational purposes, which can result in near-total egg loss and colony desertion. El Nino's ocean warming effect has also negatively impacted populations. Research suggests that, given good ocean conditions and public access restrictions, Brandt's cormorants can persist even in high-disturbance areas. The population size is very large, and hence does not approach the thresholds required for listing as a vulnerable species. For these reasons the species is evaluated as Least Concern in BirdLife International (2011) IUCN Red List for birds.

**Fun Facts:**

- The Brandt's cormorant is the least vocal of the North American cormorants at the nest. It makes sounds that are audible only from a few feet away.
- Brandt's cormorants are capable of diving over 100 meters (328 ft)!
- The genus "Phalacrocorax" comes from the Greek word phalakros meaning "bald" and korax meaning "raven."
- The name "Cormorant" comes from the Latin words corvus and marinus, which together mean "sea raven."
- Cormorant species will sometimes use old blue heron nests.

**Sources:**

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