

# *Double-crested Cormorant*

*Phalacrocorax auritus*



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## **Physical Description:**

The double-crested cormorant is a goose-sized water bird native to North America. It is one of six species of cormorants in North America and one of 38 species worldwide. This dark, long-bodied diving bird floats low in the water with its thin neck and bill raised; perches upright near water with wings half-spread to dry. Of the North America cormorant species, the double-crested is the most likely to be seen inland. This black or grayish-black bird is about three feet long with a wingspan of 4.5 feet and has a hooked bill and powerful webbed feet that are used for swimming underwater. An adult weighs about five pounds. They have an orange throat pouch (year round); sleek, streamlined body; medium-length tail; thick neck; and large, webbed feet. This species gets its name from the tufted feathers on both sides of the head, referred to as “crests,” that are present only during nesting season (and therefore double-crested cormorants may not be noticeably crested in the field).

## **Natural History:**

Double-crested cormorants seek aquatic bodies big enough to support their diet. However, they may roost and form breeding colonies on smaller lagoons or ponds, and then fly up to 40 miles to a feeding area. Double-crested cormorants forage mostly by diving from the surface and swimming underwater, propelled by their feet (although they may sometimes use wings as well). They forage singly or in groups, in clear or muddy water, and at mid to upper levels of water more often than near the bottom. Population numbers declined dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s but the North American population increased from the 1970s into the 1990s with rate of growth in the US and Canada slowing during the 1990s. In the 2003 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), USFWS estimated the total double-crested cormorant population to be two million, with nearly 70 percent of this number in the interior population (much of which nests in Canada). The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan estimates a continental population of over 740,000 breeding birds.

## **Reproduction:**

Double-crested cormorants breed between April and August, with peak activity occurring in May through July. They usually will first begin breeding at three years of age.

Common year round both on the coast and on inland waters of western Washington, double-crested cormorants can nest in colonies of up to three thousand pairs. Unpaired males begin advertising for females shortly after choosing a nest site. Males attract females by performing a conspicuous 'wing-waving display' that emphasizes their colorful head-tufts and neck. In addition to splashing with their wings, males will display to females by swimming in zigzags, diving and bringing up pieces of weeds. The male brings nest material to the female, and the female does most of the building. After forming a pair, double-crested cormorants lose their crests. The nest, a platform of sticks and debris, may be found on a rocky cliff near water, on the ground on an island, or in a tree.

### **Life Cycle:**

Typically breeding pairs of double-crested cormorants will lay three to four eggs, although sometimes one to seven eggs. Incubation is by both sexes and lasts for about 25 to 33 days. The altricial young are fed regurgitated food by both parents. Second broods are rare. After leaving the nest (after three to four weeks), the young roam the colony in groups called crèches and return to the nest site to be fed. Young first fly at about five to six weeks and are completely independent of their parents by ten weeks. The average life expectancy for wild birds is 6.1 years, although the oldest documented wild double-crested cormorant lived to be seventeen years, nine months!

### **Range:**

Double-crested cormorants are widely distributed in North America. In fact, the double-crested cormorant is the most numerous and most widely distributed species of the North American cormorants. In the U.S. and Canada, it is the only cormorant to occur in large numbers in the interior as well as on the coasts. On the Pacific Coast, including Alaska, most are resident; some disperse northward; but more disperse southward, as far as Sinaloa, Mexico. In British Columbia, birds wintering north of breeding areas likely include migrants from Alaska. Double-crested cormorants winter inland along the Columbia River of Washington and Oregon, throughout the near coastal counties of Oregon and California, throughout the Central Valley of California, and along the lower Colorado River. In Washington, they nest on islands in Grays Harbor and on rocky islets along the outer coast. Non-breeding birds can be found at lower elevations throughout western Washington. In eastern Washington, they breed at the Potholes Reservoir, Moses Lake, Winchester and Frenchman Hills Wasteways, Crab Creek (all in Grant County), at the McNary National Wildlife Refuge (Walla Walla County), at Usk (on the Pend Oreille River in Pend Oreille County), and at Cow Lake (Adams County).

### **Diet:**

Double-crested cormorants eat fish and other aquatic life. While their diet varies with season and place, it includes a wide variety of fish (over 250 species) as well as crab, shrimp, crayfish, frogs, salamanders, and eels. Sometimes snakes, mollusks, and plant material are also eaten.

### **Threats:**

Population numbers declined dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s due to contaminants acquired from fish. Since the ban of DDT, populations increased steadily, if not explosively in some areas.

Double-crested cormorants are sensitive to human disturbance to colonies, and they are often persecuted as predators of commercial fish. El Niño events reduce the number of breeding pairs as well as the reproductive success of breeders. In some regions, wildlife management agencies have culled some nesting populations because of concerns that the birds would crowd out other colonial water birds. Although the Washington population along the outer coast increased slightly from 1978 to 1994, it has declined since 1995, most likely because of unfavorable ocean conditions.

### **Fun Facts:**

- After feeding, cormorants often go to a nearby stump, dock, rock-outcropping or piling to extend, and dry, their water-logged feathers in the sun's rays. Their oil gland doesn't produce enough oil to prevent their feathers from becoming waterlogged.
- A group of cormorants has many names, including a "flight", "gulp", "rookery", "sunning", and "swim."
- Cormorant species in Asia have been trained to catch fish for people!

### **Sources:**

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