

Pelagic Cormorant

Phalacrocorax pelagicus



Photo by
<http://www.racerocks.ca/phalacrocorax-pelagicus-pelagic-cormorant-the-race-rocks-taxonomy/>

Physical Description:

The pelagic cormorant measures about 20-35 inches in length. It is one of six species of cormorants in North America and one of 38 species worldwide. Extended wings are about 39 to 48 inches in length and adults weigh between 48 and 86.1 oz. A pelagic cormorant has a dark, very slender bill with a hooked upper beak. They also have long, slender necks. Pelagic cormorants in non-breeding plumage have glossy black feathers. The bare facial skin is a vivid magenta. Breeding adults have a small red throat patch (can be difficult to see) and two small crests – one on top of the head and one at the nape. In breeding plumage, black-plumaged adults have white patches on their flanks. In fact, it is the only cormorant within its natural range with conspicuous white patches on the flanks during the breeding season. Males and females look alike, although males are slightly larger. These birds are known to hold their necks straight out when in flight. Juveniles have flat (not glossy) brown plumage that turns into slightly lighter brown on the underside. They lack the crests of the adult.

Natural History:

Pelagic cormorants can be found usually rather close to shore when in the ocean, but also sometimes well out to sea. Pelagic cormorants favor rocky bays and areas of deep water near the base of cliffs. The pelagic cormorant can be solitary in its feeding but gregarious at other times, with groups perching together on rocks near water, holding wings out to dry. During the nesting season, even non-breeding individuals come to roost at night around the edges of nesting colonies, but colonies are often smaller than those of its relatives. Pelagic cormorants are often more shy and harder to approach than other cormorants. In terms of their population, their numbers are probably stable or in decline, but not sufficiently to approach the thresholds for vulnerable status. Their numbers reportedly increased in coastal British Columbia during the 20th century and the North American population is estimated to be around 130,000, with close to three-quarters of those in Alaska. Local populations often fluctuate considerably because of movement among breeding sites.

Reproduction:

Pelagic cormorants reach reproductive age when they are about two years old, and have been recorded to breed until they were nearly 18 years old. Most nesting activities are reported in May or June. They nest along the coast as well as in bays and sounds. They breed either in small, loose colonies together with other cormorants and other seabirds or solitary, far away from any nearest neighbors. They will nest on islands or on steep, rocky coasts along narrow ledges. Males will perform elaborate courtship displays to attract females, which involve arching the neck and hopping, pointing their bills up, moving the head up and down, lifting folded wings and fluttering them to show off the white patches on their flanks, as well as repeated "yawning" displays, during which the male throws the head back as he calls out. Their compact shallow bowl nests are piled up seaweeds, sticks, mosses, grass and marine debris and held together and cemented to the cliff face by the birds' own excrement (feces and urine). These nests usually have a deep hollow indentation in the center, which is sometimes lined with feathers. These nests are often reused over several breeding seasons, or pairs may alternate between two or three nesting sites - repairing and/or rebuilding upon a nest before the nesting season commences.

Life Cycle:

A pair of pelagic cormorants usually produce one clutch a season, but may replace a lost brood. The average clutch consists of two to seven bluish-white eggs (mostly three to four eggs) and the parents share the incubation of the eggs for about 31 to 34 days (however, some resources list the incubation period lasting only 21 days). Incubation time may partly depend on environmental conditions and the experience and diligence of the parents. Hatchlings weigh about 1 oz (35 g) and are completely naked. However, within days, they grow sooty-grey down feathers. Both parents feed and protect the young. The juveniles fledge when they are about 50 to 60 days old and may be capable of short flights at 35 to 40 days. Parents may tend and feed young for a few weeks after they leave the nest. The oldest known pelagic cormorant from British Columbia lived to be 17 years old.

Range:

In North America, pelagic cormorants are only found on the Pacific Coast. Pelagic cormorants range from the Arctic waters of the Chukchi and Bering Seas, south along the North American Coast to Baja, California. They also breed along the Asian coast to southern China. Pelagic cormorants are found year-round in most of their breeding range, but withdraw in winter from the northernmost parts of their range along the western coast of Alaska when waters freeze, and they become more common off southern California and Baja.

Diet:

Pelagic cormorants usually forage alone in sheltered inlets and bays in the vicinity of kelp beds or among rocks, and outside the breeding season venture out to fish at sea. They mostly feed on various small fish - typically bottom-living and non-schooling - including sand eels, sculpins, gunnells, rockfish, pollocks, sandlances and others. They also take crustaceans, including crab, shrimp and worms. They usually swim until they locate prey and even though they prefer

shallow waters when foraging, they may dive to depths of 180 feet (~55 meters) or more from the surface of the water down to on or near the seafloor. They are propelled by their feet and steer with their wings as they pursue their prey under water. Fish are generally grabbed in their bills, without spearing them.

Threats:

This numerous and widespread species has a very large range and is not considered threatened by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). The bulk of its population is found in the relatively inaccessible waters of the Bering Sea region; about 50,000 each breed in the Kuril Islands, the Bering Sea islands, and the U.S. state of Alaska and its offshore islands (including the Aleuts). Current threats include oil spills, competition with gillnet fisheries and drowning in nets. The impact of El Nino on weather and food may also affect local populations as evidenced by historical records. Intrusion in nesting areas by fishermen, kayakers and divers can also be disruptive.

Fun Facts:

- The name “Pelagic Cormorant” is misleading as the species prefers near shore areas year round.
- Pelagic cormorants are the smallest of the North American cormorants.
- A local “hot spot” for sightings of pelagic cormorants is at the Anacortes Ferry Terminal, where you can frequently see them nesting on the pilings.
- Their nests may be as deep as 5 to 6 feet (1.5 - 1.8 meters)!
- On average, a cormorant of any species can reach speeds of up to 55 kilometers per hour.
- Cormorants have short wings due to their need to swim. Due to this, they have the highest flight cost of any other bird.

Sources:

<https://www.beautyofbirds.com/pelagiccormorants.html>
<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/pelagic-cormorant>
<https://www.nps.gov/chis/learn/nature/pelagic-cormorant.htm>
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Pelagic_Cormorant/overview
<http://tonsoffacts.com/25-fun-and-interesting-facts-about-cormorants/>
http://www.alaskasealife.org/alaska_species/14

Created October 2019
by Tracie Merrill