

FIRST NESTING OF THE DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT AT ONEIDA LAKE, NEW YORK

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Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) population on Lake Ontario experienced a dramatic increase in size, growing from approximately 22 pairs in 1974 (Price and Weseloh 1986) to 3,400 pairs at six different colonies in 1987 (Carroll 1988). The marked increase in population size has been accompanied by an expansion in the range of this bird. This paper reports, for the first time, the establishment of a small colony of Double-crested Cormorants nesting inland on Oneida Lake in central New York.

A small breeding colony of fewer than 20 pairs has established itself on Wantry Island, a small island (12 x 80 m) located in the northwest part of Oneida Lake, Oswego County, New York. The first known sighting of a cormorant nest at this location was made in 1984 by Patty and Eric Bollinger (*pers. comm.*). This single nest was built in a large willow tree located on the eastern end of the island. The nest was not located until late in the season and contained only the remnants of eggshells when it was checked. The same nest was again present in 1985; however, it is not known whether the nest was used by cormorants.

During the summer of 1986, I found five cormorant nests in the same tree on Wantry Island. All of these nests were being tended by Double-crested cormorants. However, no attempt was made to determine if any fledglings were produced that year. On 28 May 1987, I observed 18 cormorant nests in the willow tree and approximately 114 adult cormorants in the immediate vicinity of the island. The 18 nests were located high off the ground and no attempt was made to examine them for eggs or the presence of nestlings. Despite additional short-term visits to the island, I observed neither nestlings nor adults feeding young. On 10 July, however, I observed young cormorants perched in the willow tree and various counts made throughout the rest of July indicated that between 20 and 30 fledgling cormorants were present at any one time in the tree.

Fledgling counts were made from a boat at least 200 feet offshore, with the aid of binoculars. As a result, I often found it difficult to ascertain whether a bird was a fledgling or an adult. Counts are, therefore, approximations. I believe, however, that this colony of 18 nesting pairs produced a minimum of 15 fledglings in 1987.

Double-crested cormorants were first documented nesting on Lake Ontario in 1938 when a colony had established itself on Scotch Bonnet Island, Ontario (Baillie 1947). The Double-crested Cormorant popula-

tion subsequently has expanded its range into eastern Lake Ontario, colonizing other islands. Gull Island, New York, was colonized in 1945 (Kutz and Allen 1947) and was the first recorded nesting of Double-crested Cormorants within New York state. Two additional New York islands in Lake Ontario have since been colonized by cormorants; Bass Island in the 1960s and Little Galloo Island in the 1970s (Price and Weseloh 1986). The potential for expansion to other islands in Eastern Lake Ontario seems high.

On 18 September 1987, observers counted between 1,000 and 1,100 Double-crested Cormorants on or near Wantry Island, Oneida Lake, New York (Richmond *pers. comm.*). These birds were not observed on Oneida Lake during the summer months, but as migrants which clearly represent a potential source of new breeders. The potential for these birds to expand their breeding effort to other islands in Oneida Lake is quite high. Observations suggest that this cormorant colony will continue to increase in coming years.

Any effects which the increasing cormorant population may have on the Oneida Lake sport fishery is unknown at this time. Double-crested cormorants are opportunistic feeders and will vary their diet according to prey availability (Pilon, Burton and McNeil 1983). Gizzard shad were abundant in Oneida Lake during the summer of 1987. Richard Colesante of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (*pers. comm.*) visited Wantry Island during the summer of 1987 and reported observing only gizzard shad in the food material regurgitated by the cormorant chicks. Further research, however, needs to be done on the Oneida Lake double-crested cormorant colony to determine what other fish the colony may be consuming, in what amounts, and what effect this consumption may have on the Oneida Lake sport fishery.

Literature Cited

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