PHALACROCORAX CARBO.

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Cormorant.

Pelecanus carbo, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 51.

——— *phalacrocorax*, Brünn. Orn. Bor., p. 31.

Carbo cormoranus, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., tom. ii. p. 576.

——— *glacialis*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 817.

Halieus carbo, Illig. Prodr., p. 279.

——— *cormoranus*, Naum. Vög. Deutschl., 1842, tom. i. p. 52.

Graculus carbo, Gray & Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 667.

THERE is perhaps no group of birds so generally dispersed over the rocky sea-shores of the globe as the Cormorants; for one or other species may be seen everywhere. The extreme southern parts of Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Patagonia abound with them; and they are equally numerous in America, Europe, Japan, and other parts of the north. They are also found in most intermediate countries. Generally speaking, each country is tenanted by its own peculiar kind; but in some few cases certain species may be regarded as almost cosmopolitan, being found in many different localities, of which the present bird is an instance; for, besides Europe, the Common Cormorant is also found over a great part of North America, India, China, and Africa; and I now believe that the bird inhabiting Australia, which has been named *Phalacrocorax Novæ Hollandiæ*, can scarcely be separated from it. That it frequents all the rocky sides of the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland is certain. In winter it ascends the inlets of the sea, and sometimes resorts to the lakes of the interior in summer, when it may be often seen fishing their waters; and great indeed must be the destruction it effects among our freshwater fishes during such visits. On this head Mr. Robert Gray states, in his 'Birds of the West of Scotland':—"There is a large breeding colony every year on Loch Moan, in Ayrshire, a place but little visited, and distinguished for nothing but these Cormorants and the sterile scenery by which it is surrounded. In the breeding-season of 1867 the place was visited by a fishing-party, who, finding nothing in the loch (every fish having been devoured by the birds), launched a boat they had brought across the hills, and proceeded to the island, where they built a pyramid of Cormorants' eggs, which they had no difficulty in gathering, to the height of two or three feet, and smashed the entire lot with large stones. One of the party informed me, though the eggs were not counted, more than a thousand were destroyed, and that a similar colony existed a few years ago on the lochs of Mochrum and Dumwall, in Wigtonshire." I commend this passage to the notice of those who are framing laws for the protection of our native birds.

From time immemorial, Cormorants have been more or less subject to domestication, at least so far as to conduce to the pleasures of sport. On this head I take the liberty of transcribing the following passage from the pen of Mr. F. H. Salvin, published in 'Land and Water':—

"Since the publication of my work entitled 'Falconry, its Claims, History, and Practice,' to which I added a few chapters upon Cormorant-fishing, I have picked up a good deal of its early history; and having improved in the management of these birds, I now venture to offer an article or two upon the subject, hoping they may be acceptable to the readers of 'Land and Water.' Before I commence, I must express the hope that the most ardent lovers of the rod will be liberal and not begrudge a little Cormorant-fishing during the summer, when it is too bright and hot for them to pursue their 'gentle art.' Of course the owner of Cormorants should likewise be the possessor of streams; for then he can fish them as he likes, and thus he can keep his birds in good practice, and be ready to accept any invitation to fish distant streams, &c. Here I may remark that it is a delightful summer amusement, which has its advantages. For instance, 'meets' may be got up, and will be found an excellent means of assembling large parties of friends for a picnic or a 'swell luncheon.' It comes in so nicely; for at that time of the year most other rural sports are at a standstill; and to the admirers of scenery it must have additional charms, as the prettiest parts of the country are always to be found by our brooks and rivers. Many and many are the 'meets' I have enjoyed and have to thank my kind friends for.

"The Cormorant is too well known to require its natural history; and so I will proceed to the ancient history of this curious and ingenious method of fishing. Its origin is Chinese; and I think the first Jesuit missionaries were the earliest to mention it in their writings. In the reign of James I., Ogleby was sent on an embassy to China, and in the two large volumes he afterwards published he gives a description of the Chinese method of using these birds for taking fish; and no doubt it is a much older invention, as I have seen it represented

upon ancient china at Leagram Hall, Lancashire. It can easily be understood that James I., who was so passionately fond of sport, would not be long in taking up Cormorant-fishing; and hence we find many interesting documents confirming this in the Record Office. From these papers it appears that he built an extensive establishment for his Cormorants about the spot where the new Houses of Parliament have been erected; and here he had ponds made and stored with suitable fish, and filled with water from the Thames by means of sluices. John Wood seems to have been the first Master of the Royal Cormorants, which, like the Master of the Horse, and the Master of the Royal Buckhounds, was an office of importance. Luke, Robert, and Richard Wood, George Hutchinson, and John Harris, gentlemen, are mentioned; but they appear to have been only Cormorant-keepers."

"Cormorants, when at their breeding-stations," remarks Yarrell, "seem to prefer the higher parts of the rocks or cliffs; and many birds congregate harmoniously together. They make a large nest, composed of sticks, with a mass of seaweed and long coarse grass; they lay four, five, and sometimes six eggs, which are small compared with the size of the bird. The eggs are oblong, similar in shape at both ends, rough in texture externally, of a chalky white colour, varied with pale blue, the length two inches nine lines, by one inch and seven lines in breadth. Mr. Selby says, 'The young, when first excluded, are blind, and covered with a bluish-black skin; in the course of a few days they acquire a thick covering of black down, and are sufficiently fledged to take to the water, though still unable to fly, in the space of three weeks or a month.' The old birds fly well, generally low over the surface of the water; they swim rapidly, and dive in perfection; their food is fish, which they appear to catch with great ease and hold with certainty by the sharp, hooked, horny point of the upper mandible, their dilatable throat enabling them to swallow a large prey. When fishing, they are frequently observed to carry their heads under water, perhaps that vision may not be interfered with by the ripple on the surface. They are frequently seen sitting on posts, rails, or leafless trees by the water-side, when, if a fish should move on the surface within their sight, it is pounced upon and caught to a certainty. An eel is a favourite morsel with him; and a Cormorant has been seen to pick up an eel from the mud, return to the rail he was previously sitting upon, strike the eel three or four hard blows against the rail, toss it up in the air, and, catching it by the head in its fall, swallow it in an instant."

Perhaps the most interesting feature connected with the various members of this somewhat large family of water-birds is the degree of ornamentation by which they are characterized during the periods of spring and summer, in which respect no two species are precisely alike. Several of the foreign kinds are more highly decorated than our own, some having double crests, others the cheek-feathers greatly developed; and others, again, are distinguished by peculiar marks on the thighs. That these extraordinary appendages are perfectly useless as regards the economy of the birds is certain; and they cannot be regarded as sexual distinctions, both sexes being clothed alike, and the female being in some instances more beautifully marked than the male; neither can it be for the purpose of attracting the fishes or the lower animals upon which the bird feeds, inasmuch as they are only carried at one season and not at others, and are not assumed under any circumstances until the birds are fully adult, say at least two years old; it therefore appears to me that they are for ornamentation only. A similar nuptial dress is to be found among other groups of water-birds, particularly the Grebes, the Auks, and the Penguins.

The principal figure in the accompanying Plate is about two thirds of the natural size, in the plumage of spring.

Gould, John. 1873. "Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo* [Pl. 52]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324096>.

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