

(Jeff Lemons)



Phalacrocoracidae the CORMORANTS

The Cormorant family is comprised of 40 species of cormorants and “shags” distributed worldwide. These birds are known to be excellent divers and are exceptionally proficient at catching fish and other creatures while swimming underwater. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was a common practice in the Far East for fishermen to capture young cormorants and train them to catch and return fish. A metal ring was placed around the bird’s neck to keep it from swallowing them. Trained cormorants were quite proficient at their task: one anecdotal story published in *The Charlotte Observer* in 1913, reported that “a well-trained cormorant will catch 100–150 good-sized fish an hour—a record that leaves the average human angler hopelessly beaten.”

The Cormorant family is represented by two species in North Carolina: the Double-crested Cormorant and the Great Cormorant. The Double-crested Cormorant was once a rarity in the Central Carolinas; however, today flocks numbering in the hundreds move through this part of the Piedmont each year. It is described in detail below. The Great Cormorant is described in the Supplementary Bird List.

Cormorants were once widely reviled and persecuted by hunters and fishermen in many regions of the world. In fact, the name “cormorant” was once a derogatory appellation in this part of the South, commonly used in the nineteenth century to indicate a greedy or gluttonous person. After the Civil War, it was regularly applied to state and local politicians, or carpetbaggers, and businessmen from the North. There are scores of examples of this use of “cormorant” in local newspapers. One is from an account of a trip to the “Pinnacle of the Blue Ridge” (Mount Mitchell) published in *The Charlotte Journal* in 1847. It described the preparation of provisions for the trip and noted: “The cooking part is considered the most indispensable from the fact that no calculation previously made and accorded with by the cook, ever agrees with the demand made upon the ‘provision bag’ by the cormorant appetites of those who go on the mountains as ‘campers out.’” A second example is from an editorial published in *The Charlotte Observer* in January 1887. The editor described the achievements of a delegation from Mecklenburg County at a recent meeting of the legislature in Raleigh, writing: “We are satisfied that if all the counties of the State had exercised the good sense displayed by old Mecklenburg, the interests of the State would be safe from the much-abused, ‘greedy cormorants’ and ‘soulless corporations,’ and the time would speedily return when it would be an honor to be a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina.”