

## Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*



**Folk Name:** Water-Turkey, Snakebird

**Status:** Migrant (Breeder, rare on eastern edge of region)

**Abundance:** Very Rare to Rare

**Habitat:** Lakes, creeks, ponds, or open water; with trees nearby for roosting

The Anhinga is a unique and unusual-looking bird that favors freshwater swamps and slow-moving creek and lake habitats. This bird has gone by many common names. Ornithologists once called it the “American Darter,” but local people have called it many strange names including “Water-Turkey,” “Snakebird,” and “Whang-doodle.” The authors of *Birds of North Carolina* noted the Anhinga was both “odd-looking and weirdly acting.” In flight, the Anhinga has an unusual appearance and shape often described as a “flying cross.” When it is swimming in search of food, only the long curved neck, narrow head, and long, thin, pointed bill can be seen; thus, giving it the appearance of a snake moving through the water. One Carolina author provided this description of their nestlings: “The young are even more reptilian looking than the parents; they are queer, snaky little creatures covered with beautiful buffy down which contrasts sharply with the dark feathers which later appear.”

The Anhinga breeds in both Carolinas. In South Carolina, it is most abundant in the Coastal Plain, but breeding colonies have been found west to Richland County and north to Kershaw County. The breeding range of Anhinga in North Carolina has expanded over the last century. It was originally found only in a small section of the southeastern Coastal Plain. Searches conducted between 1898 and 1931 confirmed only a single nest, but by the 1940s, the Anhinga had become a “well-established summer resident” in the state. By the 1950s, the population had grown and expanded westward, as far as Lumberton, where a large nesting colony was found about 100 miles east of Charlotte. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Anhinga breeding continued to expand both northward and westward in North Carolina.

Only six sightings of Anhinga were published from the Central Carolina region before 1995. The first Anhinga ever reported in the North Carolina Piedmont was found in Mecklenburg County. J.H. Carson discovered a single bird on the Catawba River near Mount Holly on May 4, 1950. His record was published in the 1959 update of *Birds of North Carolina*. Two years later on July 26, 1952, an Anhinga was reported on Zimmerman’s Lake in Spartanburg, SC, about 50 miles southwest of Charlotte. About 30 years later, Doug McNair spotted one at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson



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County on July 30, 1981, and Bill Hilton Jr. observed an immature Anhinga soaring with vultures in York County on September 8, 1984. Kevin Hennings found another Anhinga in “northern York County” on April 22, 1990. Lastly, on June 8, 1992, Robin Carter sighted a female Anhinga at a beaver pond at the Flat Creek Preserve in Lancaster County. At that time, the Anhinga breeding colony in Kershaw County was active (about 60 miles away), but sightings of Anhinga were still considered a rare occurrence anywhere in the Piedmont.

Over the past two decades, Anhinga sightings have increased in the North Carolina Piedmont, and there have been multiple sightings of Anhinga in the Central Carolinas. Anhinga have been seen in York County, Lancaster County, Gaston County, Iredell County, Rowan County, Cabarrus County, Union County, Anson County, and as far west as Bakers Mountain in Catawba County. Six reports of Anhinga were recorded just from Mecklenburg County alone during that time, including a group of five birds seen by Judy Walker, flying over Mint Hill on April 17, 2010, which is the largest single group ever sighted in this region.

Today, sightings of Anhinga are occurring annually along the region’s eastern boundary. Anhinga are now believed to be occasionally or regularly breeding at Pee Dee National Wildlife in Anson County, and possible breeding has been reported at the Buck Steam Station in Rowan County and in southeastern Stanly County. On April 9, 2011, David and Marcia Wright provided a report of two birds they found in a Great Blue Heron rookery on an island in the Davidson Channel of Lake Norman:

We pulled the boat in close to shore and found a “pair” of Anhinga (male and female) sitting in the upper boughs of a tree. The silvery feathers of the male’s back, dagger-like yellow bill, long tail, “snaky” neck, etc. were all visible. The nearby female’s buffy neck and throat, dagger-like yellow bill, neck and long, fan-shaped tail were all visible. ...As to whether the Anhingas seen this evening were migrant overshoots (likely) or might represent some early opportunists moving into the rookery, time will tell.

Three months later (July 12, 2011), Ron Clark found a juvenile Anhinga in a Cabarrus County swamp, half a mile from the Mecklenburg County line, raising the question as to how far this bird had traveled from its natal site. Central Carolina birders are anxiously waiting for confirmation of Anhinga nesting as sightings of this species slowly continue to increase throughout the region.