

Neotropic Cormorant: New to Ontario and Canada

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During mid afternoon on 3 May 2005, a Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) was found by the authors on the north shore of Lake Erie at Wheatley Harbour, Essex County, Ontario. The exciting discovery of this new bird for Ontario and Canada transformed an otherwise rather ordinary day of birding!

After searching the Hillman Marsh area, Liz and Dave Milsom came to Wheatley Harbour to check for shorebirds and gulls. There were no birds on the west beach so Dave drove onto the pier on the west side of the harbour where the fishing boats are moored. After scanning the gulls on the docks, he looked at those on posts at the end of the pier. It was then that he noticed an odd-looking cormorant on the farthest post. Milsom looked around to see whether any other birders were present, and spotted Tozer on the east side of the harbour. Milsom shouted to him and pointed at the cormorant on the post. Milsom then checked his old Peterson (1980) field guide and immediately saw that the head illustrated for "Olivaceous Cormorant" (now Neotropic) was a perfect match for the bird on the post. He grabbed his camera and slowly

advanced up the pier, clicking as he went (Figure 1). By then, Tozer had carefully examined the bird with his telescope and shouted "Neotropic Cormorant" across the harbour! Milsom nodded but did not speak, not wanting to frighten off the cormorant which he was then approaching fairly closely. After taking a number of photographs, Milsom drove around to the east side of Wheatley Harbour to join Ron and Pat Tozer. Milsom then called the Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre on his cell phone to alert the many birders there who would soon be rushing to Wheatley Harbour to see this rarity.

Field notes made by Tozer included the following: smaller and thinner compared with adjacent Double-crested Cormorants (*P. auritus*); shorter wings with a greenish sheen; longer tail; smaller head and shorter bluish bill; white V bordering yellow skin at the base of the bill; and a few short white plumes on the side of the head. In flight, its tail and neck appeared to be about the same length, in contrast to the shorter tails of the Double-crested Cormorants.

This Neotropic Cormorant in definitive alternate plumage was under observation by us on 3 May from 1520 to 1540h. During that



Figure 1: Neotropic Cormorant in definitive alternate plumage at Wheatley Harbour, Essex County, Ontario on 3 May 2005. Photo by David J. Milsom.

time, it joined several Double-crested Cormorants in the harbour, swimming and successfully diving for fish. Ellen Smout and some birding friends just happened to come by then, and excitedly took some photographs of the cormorant as it swam

in the harbour channel. At 1540h, the Neotropic Cormorant and several Double-crested took off, flew low out of the harbour mouth to the lake, and headed southwestward toward Hillman Marsh. It was literally about one and a half minutes after the birds

disappeared from view that the first alerted birder arrived from Point Pelee! Many birders searched diligently for the remainder of the day at Wheatley Harbour, Hillman Marsh, Point Pelee and Leamington, but the Neotropic Cormorant could not be found. The thought that it might not be seen again created much disappointment.

Starting early on 4 May, even more birders arrived at Wheatley Harbour, hoping that the cormorant would return or be located elsewhere. Then, in mid morning, Bob Curry and Glenda Slessor first spotted what was presumably the same Neotropic Cormorant with two Double-cresteds, flying into the harbour. Many people got to see the bird that day, and it was subsequently observed at Wheatley Harbour on 5 and 6 May, as well. Some observations involved it flying to or coming from nearby Hillman Marsh, also. However, the Neotropic Cormorant was never seen within Hillman Marsh proper, and may have been travelling farther south to West Cranberry Pond in Pelee Marsh to roost, since Double-crested Cormorants by the hundreds (sometimes thousands) congregate there regularly (A. Wormington, pers. comm.).

Discussion

The Neotropic Cormorant is one of the most widely distributed of the cormorants, its breeding range extending throughout South and Central America, Mexico, the West

Indies, and northward to New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana (Telfair and Morrison 1995). It has been reported as casual to Mississippi, southeastern California, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, southern Minnesota, and northern Illinois, with a sight report for southern Nevada (Telfair and Morrison 1995, AOU 1998). Most occurrences beyond the nesting range have involved postbreeding dispersal (Telfair and Morrison 1995). Recent examples of vagrant Neotropic Cormorants include a pair of adults at Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge in Lac Qui Parle County, Minnesota from 12 August to 6 October 2003 (Bardon 2004); and one found on the Potomac River at Seneca, Maryland on 12 August 2005, which was later seen regularly in that area from 24 October to 11 November, and was the first record for the East Coast of North America (Day 2006). Since 1970, the population of Neotropic Cormorant in the United States has fluctuated but risen steadily overall, with increases in the number and size of breeding colonies, and establishment of new nesting colonies (Telfair and Morrison 1995).

The occurrence of this Neotropic Cormorant at Wheatley Harbour and Hillman Marsh from 3 to 6 May 2005 has been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC), and constitutes the first record for Ontario (Crins 2006). Although there were some other reports of Neotropic

Cormorant after 6 May, at Wheatley Harbour and Port Alma, Chatham-Kent Region, they were either not submitted to the OBRC or were not accepted by it (Crins 2006).

The Neotropic Cormorant reported here is also the first confirmed record for Canada. A small cormorant identified by a single observer as a Neotropic Cormorant (then Olivaceous) was reported on Wascana Lake in Regina, Saskatchewan, on 8 September 1989. The sighting with minimal description of the bird was later published as the first record for Canada (Brazier 1990). However, that record is reportedly not considered valid by most ornithologists in Canada.

Literature Cited

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Neotropic Cormorant is currently designated as “hypothetical” on the *Field Checklist of Saskatchewan Birds* (Nature Saskatchewan 2005). The Saskatchewan report was not included in the casual occurrences listed for Neotropic Cormorant in the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (AOU 1998), and the species was not on the “List of Canadian Birds” published by Birders Journal (2003), either.

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