

THE MISSISSIPPI KITE

Olivaceous Cormorant - First Mississippi Record

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On 4 August 1979, we observed an immature Olivaceous Cormorant (Phalacrocorax olivaceus) at Bellefontaine Beach, Jackson County, Mississippi. Over a period of several hours it perched on a piling, and dove for food in shallow water. Identifying this species outside of its normal range, and more than 100 miles east of its previously recorded occurrence (27 March 1959, New Orleans, Sidney A. Gauthreaux in Lowery, Louisiana Birds, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1974) was done very cautiously, since (1) the bird represents a first Mississippi record, (2) was an immature, and, (3) according to field guides, should not be presumed an Olivaceous unless size comparisons with Double-crested Cormorants (Phalacrocorax auritus) can be obtained.

The presence of any cormorant on the Mississippi Coast in early August is very rare, and we approached the identification with the suspicion that the bird in question could have been an Olivaceous Cormorant because of (1) the early date, (2) it's small size when compared with a Royal Tern at rest on close-by piling, and (3) disturbance of weather which had affected both the Louisiana and Texas coasts (Hurricane Bob, 11 July 1979, and Hurricane Claudette, 24 July 1979). Notes made at the times of observation remark upon the compact, small size, bill shorter and less heavy than that of a Double-crested Cormorant, pale throat pouch of yellow-orange, almost uniformly tawny undersides in contrast to immature Double-crested Cormorants which seem to have more delineation of lights and darks on the undersides. We noted no plumage that could have been construed as "white." Eye color was not seen. Viewing distances varied between 100-200 feet viewing times as long as 45 minutes, in sunlight which moved from east, to overhead, to west of the bird. Both observers were using 20-60X Zoom spotting scopes and 7X35 binoculars. At 2:00 P.M., Malcolm Hodges took photographs of the cormorant on the piling with a Royal Tern for comparison in at least one photo. In addition, the piling itself was measured; the diameter was 12 inches, and a photograph was made of the piling being measured. The bird was not seen again after 4 August. Using extrapolation, the bird is seen to measure 22-23 inches, well within the size range for Olivaceous Cormorant and smaller by at least 5 inches than the Double-crested Cormorant.

Copies of the photographs were sent to Dr. Robert D. Purrington and Thomas A. Imhof (both regional editors of American Birds). Dr. Purrington accepts this first Mississippi record with the reservation that the shape of the gular pouch leaves some doubt. To quote a part of his response... "I personally measured overall length and bill

length and bill length of the cormorant and on the basis of measurements, the bird would certainly seem to be an Olivaceous Cormorant. On the basis of field marks (shape of gular pouch, mainly), I would have some doubt." Mr. Imhof accepts the identification without qualification, and adds, "I have seen many Double-crested Cormorants in the summertime or breeding season in New York and Florida. Also, I have seen many thousands of Neotropical (Olivaceous) Cormorants in Panama. So, I think I am reasonably familiar with plumages of both species ... It certainly seems that climate is no limiting factor on its (Olivaceous Cormorant) spread along the northern Gulf Coast, and too there are no locally breeding Double-crests to challenge any spread of the species eastward. So the appearance of the Olivaceous Cormorant farther east than its usual range along the northern Gulf Coast seems to me a perfectly natural and expected occurrence."

We submit this manuscript with the strong belief that the bird is correctly identified as an Olivaceous Cormorant, representing the first Mississippi record and the easternmost occurrence of the species in the United States. Copies of the photographs, correspondence and other documents are on file at Mississippi State University and the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science.

Possible Predation by Ants on Nestlings in Nesting Boxes

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A study of Eastern Bluebird (Sialia sialis) production in nesting boxes on a four-year-old pine plantation is being conducted near Longview (Oktibbeha County) Mississippi (Hurst et al. 1979). The nesting boxes are on creosote posts and are checked once per week.

A Carolina Chickadee (Parus carolinensis) nest was begun in one of these nesting boxes in late March 1980. The nest contained five eggs on 3, 10 and 16 April and the eggs hatched on or about 17 April. On 23 April the nestlings were dead and were covered by little black ants (Monomorium minimum). The nestlings were intact but pieces of flesh were missing. The ants could have been feeding on nestlings that died from some unknown cause, but the worker ants of this species are predaceous and have been reported to kill and eat recently hatched bluebirds and kingfishers (Megacyrle alcyon) (Smith 1965). A little black ant colony occupied a nesting box at my home, five miles east of Starkville, and probably prevented the use of the nesting box by any species of bird.