

First Cormorant Nests in 100 Years

Ed Pierce

"You don't always get what you want", sing The Stones, and that was certainly a fact at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge this summer. The Manager established a common tern nesting program but was the recipient of seven double-crested cormorant nests instead.

The efforts were clearly unrelated. Common terns started nesting on the mainland in Ohio in 1928. Before then they were known to breed only on a few islands in Lake Erie. For example, 1800 nested on Rattlesnake and Starve Island in 1927. Through the years since then, colonies up to 5000 birds have established and left various mainland locations in Ottawa and Lucas Counties, either through commercial fisherman who pulled seines on their nesting bar, egg hunters, storms or pressure from gull expansion.

In 1978, 51 pairs remained at the dredge disposal area at Bayshore power plant but this colony dwindled to 5 pairs, three of which nested with unknown success in 1986.

Conversely, cormorants had not nested in Ohio since the early 1800's. Their only previous Ohio nesting was at Grand Lake St. Mary's and apparently began about the time the reservoir was created. Dury 1930, spoke of hundreds nesting in snags from the creation of the Lake along the south shore. Howe 1898, tells of dead forests standing in the water in 1846 which were gone by 1902. Dury's account of a visit to the area in June 1867 is published in Langdon 1878:

"On the south side of the Reservoir, about seven miles from Celina, was the Water Turkey's rookery. Here I used to go and shoot them with the natives, who wanted them for their feathers; I have helped kill a boat load.

"One season I climbed up to their nests and got a cap full of their eggs. The nests were made of sticks and built in the forks of the branches. The trees (which were all dead) were mostly oaks and covered with excrement. I found from two to four eggs or young to a nest. The young were queer little creatures - looked and felt like India rubber. The old birds flew around and made their croaking notes, indicative of their displeasure at my presence. Some of the trees had ten or twelve nests on them. As the timber has rotted and blown down, the birds have become less and less numerous."

Cormorant sightings have greatly increased at the O.N.W.R. in the last three years. Strictly a migrant in the Toledo area and mainly in the fall this bird had only one summer record (1937) by 1968. This despite its reported nesting on the Chicken Islands (Ontario) since 1939. (Trautman: 12 young 1949 and Langlois: 13 nests 1954). This pattern continued at O.N.W.R. in 1981 (2 birds 10/2), 1982 (0 birds) and 1983 (2 birds 9/6) but in 1984 six birds were recorded June 3, two July 1, two September 2 and three October 7

and the explosion was on:

	1985	1986	1987
June	10	8	6
July	11	12	30
August	16	10	94
September	42	21	72
October	15	39	113
November	1	25	

This increase corresponds to the increase in this species on the east coast. I wonder what the Chicken Islands' population looks like now.

Cormorant distribution through 1962 was on the increase from its low in 1925 which was due to its persecution by man. It had by 1962 reoccupied much of its former breeding range and was increasing. Apparently the pesticide era slowed or stopped this increase. Now recovered, the species is increasing annually across northeastern United States and predicted to come into increasing conflict with fisheries managers. Indeed a proposal by the Prince Edward Island Fish and Wildlife Division to declare an open season on the species was defeated partly by the action of the P.E.I. Natural History Society. However "nuisance" individuals that feed on trout and fresh water ponds will be shot. Palmer 1962, lists the fish eaten in order of abundance by this species which appear to be largely non commercial species.

Six O.N.W.R. cormorant nests were built about the third week in June this year and a seventh was under construction on July 5. They were built in two dead snags standing in a large reservoir of water about 100 yards inside the new outermost dike at the main complex near the mouth of Crane Creek. Cormorants were seen sitting on the nests which remained through most of August until a heavy storm blew down one of the snags. On September 6, only one nest remained in the remaining snag which was the easternmost of the two. It was abandoned.

I have not heard of any young in these nests and would appreciate hearing from anyone who did. On August 2, full grown cormorants were sitting on the nests as if incubating. Palmer 1962, gives four days for nest construction, twenty-eight days for incubation and twenty-one to twenty-eight days before the young wander from the nest. At fourteen to twenty-one days there is great activity, large appetite, much exercising, and total confusion at the nest at feeding time, including trampling and begging response between young. This is the activity we should have observed by August 2, or someone should have seen during that month, but if they did it is yet unreported to me. (Additionally, Trautman's twelve young in 1949 were seen May 5 and Langlois' thirteen nests in 1954 on May 22.) Now back to the terns. The project started in early May with loop tapes of common tern colony calls and decoys. Again the new outer dike ending at the mouth of Crane Creek was the site of this activity. Mike Tansy, Refuge Manager, reports that two nests with eggs were actually seen and a third nest was thought to exist. Chris and Mike Crofts acted as tern wardens, observing the area for tern activity from a nearby dike throughout the summer. The nests were thought to be destroyed by predators.

The project will continue next year with some sophistication learned from this year including perhaps an electrified fence to keep predators from this dike. Mike Tansy says that it generally takes at least three years for a tern colony to establish. He certainly deserves accolades and encouragement for undertaking such a worthwhile project.

As The Stones say (eventually) in closing, "If you try sometimes you just might get what you need."

Bibliography

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