Fact Sheet: Cormorants

Basic Facts:

Cormorants are large black birds with long necks that can frequently be seen flying over the main lake or perched on or near Heron Island. They are largely responsible for most of the white staining on the trees. Cormorants have a longish tail and a yellow throat-patch. Adults have white thigh patches in the breeding season.

Length	Wingspan	Weight
70 to 102 cm (28–40 in)	121 to 160 cm (48–63 in)	2.6 to 3.7 kg (5.7-8.2 lbs)

Cormorants in the Park

The main lake in the Country Park is home to approximately 30 resident breeding pairs of cormorant that stay all year round.

Cormorants are frequently associated with coastal waters but it is quite normal for them to move inland, notably in the winter. Some like those in the Park, remain inland all their lives. It is thought that the first ones came from the Netherlands, where tree-nesting is common.

It has been estimated that there are about 9,000 breeding pairs in the whole of the UK. Of these some 1,600 birds nest inland. Numbers are boosted during the winter when some 24,000 birds can be found here, of these, 10,000 are found inland.

Food

Although cormorants can be seen fishing in the lakes, either individually or collaboratively in flocks, it is known that they will fly long distances in search of food. In fact most of their food is found in places other than in the Country Park.

Cormorants eat fish between 5 -15cms (2-6 inches) and consume on average, about 400g – 500g every day. They also eat molluscs & crustaceans. When looking for food, they swim around ducking their heads beneath the surface to look for fish. When one bird dives others follow it. Fish are brought to the surface and swallowed head first.

The fisherman's enemy?

Few fishermen welcome the sight of the cormorants as they can rapidly deplete fish stocks. Similarly, fish farms regard them as pests as stocks of small fish are often preyed upon by cormorants. In the Park fishermen sometimes catch large fish with cormorant beak scars on their backs. The birds have been known to seize baited hooks but it is not known whether this is done accidently. The cormorant's nesting habitat on the island is periodically reduced by cutting trees down tin winter to try and limit numbers.

Behaviour

Cormorants are strong fliers and can often be seen flying low and fast across the lakes. They stretch their necks out as they fly. More commonly they can be seen perched in the trees on the island or on dead branches above the water. Cormorants are expert swimmers. They float low in the water often with just their head and neck showing.
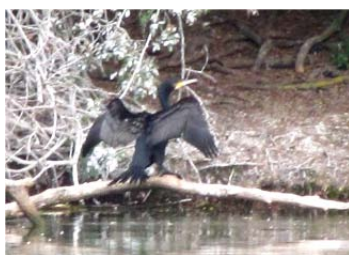

When preparing to dive they jump up and plunge into the water head-first, or just sink beneath the surface.

- They can dive to a depth 100 feet

- The longest recorded dive is of 71 seconds.

- Usually they stay under for less than half a minute, swimming about 20-30 feet below the surface.

Breeding

Cormorants nest in a colony on Heron Island. Their nests are large and bowl-shaped; built of twigs, grasses or reeds. The nests are kept clean at the expense of the surrounding foliage become plastered with the birds' droppings. When courting, cormorants wave their long necks about and the female may bend her neck right over her back. They start breeding in mid to late February and lay 2 - 4 eggs. These are incubated by both parents for about a month. The newly-hatched young are naked and have skins like black leather but later grow a curly, dark grey down. They are fed with regurgitated fish once a day by each parent; the chicks take this by pushing their heads down their parent's gullet. The chicks leave the nest and can fly in 5 - 8 weeks. Cormorants are normally quite quiet but during the breeding season the young can be heard moaning and groaning as they beg their parents for food.

Why do they stretch their wings out when they perch?

This common behaviour could be to:

- dry their wings after diving
- assist in swallowing food – often the behaviour is accompanied with a stretching of the neck. This helps to open the gullet