

Preface

The word *cormorant* isn't often the first thing on people's minds when they wake in the morning and put on the coffee, but that is exactly how I began writing this book. The process itself really started almost a year earlier as an article in *On the Water* (*OTW*), an outdoor magazine published on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, featuring fishing tales, techniques, and locations throughout New England. My writing career opened with *OTW* when I submitted a five-hundred-word piece for their reader contribution column tucked away on the last page, after the classifieds and list of advertisers. The magazine had only been on the stand for a few months when I discovered it at a little market on the Cape while getting an early breakfast before hitting the morning surf in search of hungry bluefish. I guess a lot of things start with coffee in the morning.

As it turned out, my little article about fishing for bluefish from an inflatable boat fit in well with a feature story written by one of *OTW*'s regulars. The editor added a few file photos, and my little piece wound up at the magazine's centerfold with the other story rather than hidden on the last page. To convince myself that getting published was no fluke, I submitted another piece to *OTW*, titled "Weird Days," about the odd mix of fellow fishermen and onlookers I met while surfcasting Cape Cod beaches. It told of the couple from Kansas who would not believe that creatures like toothy bluefish really existed; the woman from Boston in silver high heels who asked "Who's going to clean up this mess?" when she saw the thousands of stranded baitfish that marauding bluefish had driven onto the beach; and then the gentleman, decked out in daz-

zling cruise wear, weighed down with bulky gold chains around his neck, oozing pungent cologne, and puffing on a massive cigar, who explained to me how to land the twelve-pound bluefish I was fighting at the time. *On the Water* published it and things went on from there.

Over time, I wrote more than thirty assigned and spec articles for the editors of *OTW*, who now and then pushed me to expand an article, making *it* a better read and *me* a better writer. My byline pieces included some how-to and destination articles along with quite a few “Zen of fishing” pieces like “Quiet Places,” “Why Do We Fish?” and “Fishing Superstitions,” an *OTW* online fishing tips column, and even a feature article on plankton using student drawings from a Cape Cod charter school website. My articles also appeared in magazines such as *American Angler* and *New England Game and Fish*. I later produced work-for-hire articles for a national buying consortium representing about two hundred sporting goods retailers.

Of my articles I will always consider my *OTW* cormorant piece in a class by itself. My own first cormorant experience came while my wife and I were ghosting along in light winds on Cape Cod’s Little Pleasant Bay in our fourteen-foot sailboat. A startled double-crested cormorant surfacing from a dive rocketed directly into the air off our bow like a submarine-launched missile. When the color returned to our faces we laughed. The “incident” stayed with me when I plotted the *OTW* article.

I wrote the cormorant piece as a response to what I thought was a totally barbaric, inhumane, shotgun slaughter of close to a thousand adult cormorants and their defenseless chicks by greedy Great Lakes fishermen almost ten years earlier, in 1998. The shooters eventually claimed the birds were destroying their charter boat fishing industry by every year devouring tons of their clients’ favorite game fish, the small-mouth bass.

In my initial research I learned that tens of thousands of breeding cormorants had set up seasonal housekeeping on New York State’s Little Galloo (pronounced Ga-lew) Island in the eastern basin of Lake Ontario. In my mind, I wondered how much damage these birds could do situated on an isolated rock in the middle of one of America’s largest inland freshwater seas. But feelings directed toward cormorants aren’t always generated by what they actually do. Cormorants are often billed as “the most hated birds in the world” in newspapers and magazines. And considering the evil reputations assigned to carrion-eating vultures and

crows, and urban pigeons, the “rats with wings,” being rated as the “most hated” is not an easy accomplishment. Cormorants are despised in marinas, reviled by commercial and sport fishermen, detested by aquaculture operators, and often found insufferable by members of the public as a result of poor publicity management by the birds.

The hate also stems from people’s unfamiliarity with cormorants. Diane Pence, a biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, is quoted in an Internet interview: “Cormorants went away for a generation of people and now they’re back. And so we have a generation that hasn’t experienced the number of cormorants that used to exist.”¹

To the local fishermen, politicians, and business leaders along the shores of Lake Ontario, cormorants were plundering a resource the fishermen claimed in total as their own, their very livelihood in fact, so the cormorants nesting on Little Galloo had to go, one way or another. As an outsider, I wrote an article defending the birds and generally portrayed the charter skippers and marina owners as greedy anticonservationist killers of wildlife who did not, or would not, distinguish between their perception of the problem and the reality of the birds’ right to feed in the wild. In my mind, and in the minds of media reporters, the charter boat skippers never considered the possible effects of their own overfishing, the pollution from development of the lakeshores and riverbanks, and the growing lack of biological fertility of the lake. For the commercial and sportfishermen, it was far easier to blame the ever-present cormorant for their problems instead of really looking at the effects their industry was having on the ecology and fisheries of Lake Ontario and the other Great Lakes.

By the time I finished the article, my research folder for the piece was three inches thick with reprints of articles, reports, and symposia related to the double-crested cormorant, its natural history, and, of course, its economic impact. And at that point, I hadn’t even begun to look at the squabble double-crested cormorants had gotten themselves into in the South, where American catfish producers confronted hungry cormorants raiding their shallow catfish ponds every winter.

Shortly after the cormorant article appeared in *OTW*, I began to think about the many other complex issues and conflicts surrounding cormorants and how these birds fit into the attitudes and writings of newspaper reporters, prosecutors, sportfishermen, catfish farmers, conservationists, birders, state and federal legislators, regulators, law en-

forcement officers, and the general public. Each of these constituent groups, stakeholders, had their own view of how the double-crested cormorant was incorporated into or precipitated the conflict, producing “solutions” as varied as the number of groups involved. And in addition to individual states reacting to cormorant “infestations,” I realized that cormorant conflicts extended beyond US borders, particularly involving our northern neighbor, Canada, with which we share thousands of miles of Great Lakes shoreline and which also faces many of the same cormorant issues as does the United States.

My single research folder soon expanded to several folders, then many folders, a file box, a few file boxes. . . . You can see where this was going. I saw it as a book.

With a greater realization of the number of broad cormorant issues, and maybe not with an initial full understanding of each one, I set out to write a balanced account of the cormorant using a few self-imposed guidelines. I was determined not to fall into the trap of portraying cormorants either as warm, cuddly pets or as dirty, fish-stealing culprits determined to destroy human financial interests and perhaps even civilization as we know it. On the other side, I did set out to understand the goals and attitudes of the fishermen, catfish growers, conservationists, wildlife biologists and managers, politicians, and others, without characterizing their moral fiber or assigning *unexplained* malicious intentions. I emphasized the term *unexplained*, since I was determined to write a balanced account, representing different views, not necessarily letting them pass without criticism. As an outsider I will never have a direct stake, financial or otherwise, in the many cormorant conflicts, but I wanted to understand the people who did. People and cormorants did what they did—and were what they were—for a reason. We’ll explore those reasons throughout the book.

The Double-Crested Cormorant uses the illegal shooting at Little Galloo Island as a focal point and introduction to the cormorant and its controversies. From there the book looks at the bird itself, discussing its complex evolution and its many physical and physiological adaptations to flight and swimming, the bird’s diving and fishing prowess, and its powerful nesting drive and unwavering passion for parenthood that made it such a successful and prolific species. The double-crested is a migratory bird, protected now by state and federal statutes as well as by international treaties. To understand these issues the book examines the

roles of various government agencies such as the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, their branches and domains, and, of course, the conservation groups opposing many of their actions.

The Double-Crested Cormorant also discusses the deadly implications of the massive application of the persistent insecticide DDT beginning in the 1940s and how the chemical decimated and nearly exterminated entire populations of fish-eating birds. Then, at the southern end of the cormorant's migration, the book scrutinizes how the bird found itself entwined in the growing catfish-farming industry, facing gunners protecting their investments and livelihoods. Finally, I show how the timelines of cormorants and human interests repeatedly intersect at conflict points and look at where they are possibly headed in the future and what controversies are left brewing out there.

Sources of information on cormorants and the troubles they get into are not difficult to find. By their nature these birds either impress or aggravate a great many people. The Internet offers access to archived magazine and newspaper articles from the *New York Times* and other publications. I used public, community college, and university library sites to retrieve original texts and abstracts of studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, otherwise only accessible through subscription or membership in scientific societies. Where original sources were unavailable I chose what I considered reputable secondary sources that evaluated and summarized reports and studies. In some situations, I contacted and interviewed experts or participants in programs by phone to attach a human, rather than an institutional, perspective to the cormorant conflict. Also, several books listed in the bibliography provided the historical and regional backgrounds and settings for some of the difficulties into which cormorants have got themselves snarled.

Quoting Linda Wires, a research associate whose work we'll examine later, "Fiction becomes fact, and after a while even biologists start buying it. The cormorant lives in an Orwellian universe."² The overall intention of the book, then, is to understand the cormorant's universe, explore the relationships between cormorants and humans, and then try to clarify the conflicts for myself and my readers.

So, this June morning, while the incoming tide floods the salt marsh bordering my Cape Cod vacation rental, and as the marsh's sandpipers, plovers, and killdeer stir in the grass and a few cormorants fish the tidal creek, with a fresh coffee refill in hand, I will begin sorting it all out.