

Nature Notes, September 2022

Cormorants: Power-line Acrobats

By Barbara Hanbidge

Double-crested cormorants are large, dark-coloured water birds that feed primarily on fish. Their long slender body form is perfect for swimming swiftly underwater propelled by their strong legs and webbed feet.

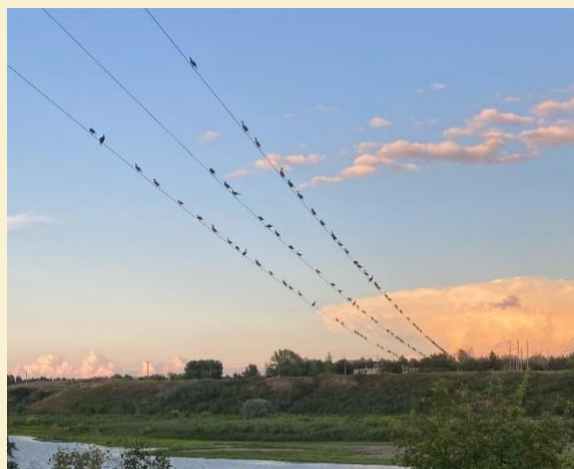
Cormorants have a long thin beak with a hook on the end that works well for grasping fish. In the air, they may fly in a V formation and are sometimes mistaken for Canada geese, but cormorants have slimmer bodies that are not pearly grey in colour and their heads lack the white chinstrap of Canada geese.

These birds are not graceful on land. They have a very difficult time taking off from the ground. When taking off from water, they will run and flap along the surface until they build up enough speed to become airborne.

In Saskatoon, cormorants may be seen along the South Saskatchewan River any time except the winter months. Small flocks or single birds will perch on the power poles and power lines spanning the river.

Watching cormorants land on the power lines is sure to bring a smile to your face. At 1.2 to 2.5 kilograms, cormorants are not small birds. When trying to land they sometimes need to make several attempts, and some of which are not very graceful. Landing is more difficult in a strong wind or when other cormorants are attempting to land on the same line at the same time. If the bird is an inexperienced young-of-the-year, the feat is even more challenging.

Some time ago, I spent more than 30 minutes watching cormorants landing and taking off from the power line that crosses the river near the Spadina Crescent and Queen Street intersection. One bird made numerous unsuccessful attempts. At one point it was hanging upside down below the wire, valiantly holding on with one foot while wildly flapping its wings, trying to grasp the power line with the other foot. Finally, it let go making a rather large splash when it fell into the river. On its



Cormorants can often be seen lined up along the power lines across the South Saskatchewan River at Queen Street. Photo Ron Jensen

next attempt, the bird successfully landed alongside the other four birds who had been watching the acrobatics.

Double-crested cormorants are related to pelicans, gannets, anhingas, tropicbirds and frigatebirds which all have webbed feet. These birds are all well adapted for catching their main food which is fish. In North America, there are six species of cormorants. Double-crested cormorants are the only species found nesting along the Pacific and Atlantic coastlines and in the central part of the continent on lakes and rivers.

Cormorants are colonial nesters with many pairs building their nests close together at the same location. Most nesting colonies in Saskatchewan are located on islands in our northern lakes. While most of the nests are built on the ground these birds will also build their nests in spruce trees growing on the islands. In a large spruce, there may be 10 or more nests on different branches. Nests are usually a loose pile of sticks, but the birds may also use cattail or bulrush stems, pieces of rope and other items as nesting material. Large cormorant colonies in Saskatchewan may contain hundreds of nests. They are very busy and noisy places.

When the young hatch, they have black skin, black eyes and a whitish throat pouch. In contrast with young birds, adult double-crested cormorants have blue-green eyes and a bright yellow throat pouch.

When you next see one of these birds try to take a closer look. You may notice that the feathers on the back are dark brown with a black edge and are quite attractive. You may also be lucky enough to see a cormorant catch and swallow a fish or perform power-line acrobatics!

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