



BIRDS OF A FEATHER LOAF TOGETHER

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THERE'S NO QUESTION THERE ARE MORE CORMORANTS THAN THERE USED TO BE, BUT WHY DO PEOPLE SEEM TO DISLIKE THIS SUCCESSFUL SPECIES? WE WANTED TO GET THE FACTS ABOUT OUR PLENTIFUL NEW NEIGHBOURS.

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE COURTESY OF TRCA



CORMORANT CHICKS STAY IN THE NEST FOR ABOUT A MONTH. ONCE THEY'RE OLD ENOUGH TO FLY, THEY MOVE TO THE GROUND (LEFT) WHERE THEY HANG OUT, OR "LOAF", WITH OTHER BIRDS THEIR AGE. KIND OF LIKE THE YOUNG TEENAGERS AROUND THE AREA.

Any time you are down at the Beach these days, you are likely to see flocks of cormorants skimming along the water in long, long ribbons, many of them hundreds of birds long. A few years back, there were very few of these birds so where did they come from, why are there so many and do we need to be concerned about cormorants?

In fact, the presence of Cormorants again on our lakes is first and foremost a sign of the health of Lake Ontario. Cormorants lived on the lake years ago but by the 1970's, were nearly wiped out by toxins containing DDT. Over the last twenty years, their numbers have increased to the point where there are currently ~7000 nests out on the spit at Tommy Thompson Park. "Considering they were threatened, this is an amazing comeback," says Karen McDonald of the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority.

The comeback hasn't gone unnoticed by locals who are quick to comment that the birds are "eating all the fish and killing all the trees." This common perception seems to be the source of the birds unpopularity but is it true?

In fact, it isn't. Cormorants do not eat "all the fish, rather, they eat predominantly Alewives - themselves an invasive species, and Round Gobie - a fish largely found to be destructive to the ecosystem. Cormorants may actually be seen as preserving the balance by eating these species. Some are concerned since some game fish also eat these species; however Karen at the TRCA - the organization who monitors both fish and bird species along Toronto's waterfront says, "We are not concerned about the fish community. We aren't seeing any change in young species."

So what about the trees then. The TRCA spends much of its Cormorant time on figuring out how to deal with the issue of the nesting in trees. Cormorants are highly social birds who nest in colonies and in particular in a rapidly increasing series of colonies on the Peninsulas of the spit out at Tommy Thomson Park. The trees out on this spit are of particular concern because there are few forested areas on the spit and the ones that exist are important for providing shade and nesting sites for other birds as well as



Studies show that cormorants primarily eat invasive fish species.

for the cormorants. The TRCA is, after all, in the business of conservation and this is their park so their approach is inclusive and encouraging rather than destructive. "We look at it from an ecological perspective," says McDonald, "we want to support the biodiversity of life on the waterfront." To that end TRCA closely monitors not only the Cormorant colonies but also neighbouring bird colonies such as those of Egrets and Night Herons which are all currently coexisting.

In fact, while popular opinion often seems to state that "they should kill those birds," in 2003 there was an outcry from environmental groups who had caught wind that the TRCA might be considering a cull of cormorants. In fact, because some of Tommy Thompson Park is owned by the province of Ontario, the province had ordered an environmental assessment which necessitated exploration of ALL options from doing nothing right up to a cull. In order to calm the outcry, the TRCA stopped the assessment, stepped back and took an inclusive approach which has brought

members of interest groups from the far left to the extreme right. This resulted in the implementation of the Double Crested Cormorant Management Strategy for 2009.

What this strategy consists of is not killing but instead containing the current cormorant colonies. This is done through a surprisingly gentle series of very hands on strategies that are undertaken at various stages through the nesting season by TRCA staff in effort to change cormorant behaviour.

Double Crested Cormorants, like other fishing species, are highly social birds. They live together, fish together and take their cues about how they are supposed to behave, from one another. While Cormorants will nest on the ground, the population at Tommy Thompson has been nesting in trees for the past twenty years. The ultimate goal is to transfer many of these nests to the ground since ground nesting alleviates the stress on the forest canopy. "Their nests are quite intense," McDonald says, "They add to



When fishing, cormorants flock together in vast numbers.

them every year and their guano is very saline and coats the leaves, preventing them from photosynthesizing." In addition, the birds tend to "loaf" or hang out in trees and they like a clear view so that they can see around them. Last but not least, Cormorants are "not the most graceful flyers and tend to crash land," says McDonald. All of this contributes to damaged branches, damaged leaves and damaged trees.

The management strategy is fourfold - keep tree nesting to existing trees; prevent nesting in new trees; plant new trees and encourage ground nesting. The birds are very smart and "site tenacious" and had their eyes on a stand of new trees but TRCA staff clapped and poked at the birds and managed to save several stands of trees. They gave the birds nesting materials such as tires and straw to encourage ground nesting and estimate that this year ground nests have increased by 80%. "I'm totally excited about this year's strategy," says McDonald, "To think we're going to change bird behaviour from nesting in a tree to nesting on the ground in a year is a lofty goal but it's working."



CORMORANTS NEST HIGH ABOVE THE GROUND AND WHEN ONE BIRD IS DISTURBED THE ENTIRE COLONY IS AGITATED WHICH IS WHY IT IS ILLEGAL TO ENTER THE CORMORANT COLONY BETWEEN MAY AND SEPTEMBER.



THIS GROUND COLONY SHOWS THE EFFECTIVE USE OF TIRES AS THE NEST BASES. THIS IS A US BASED COLONY WHERE MOST NESTING IS ON THE GROUND AND LITTLE DAMAGE IS DONE TO TREES, AN ULTIMATE GOAL OF THE TRCA IS TO MOVE THE BIRDS TO THE GROUND.

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