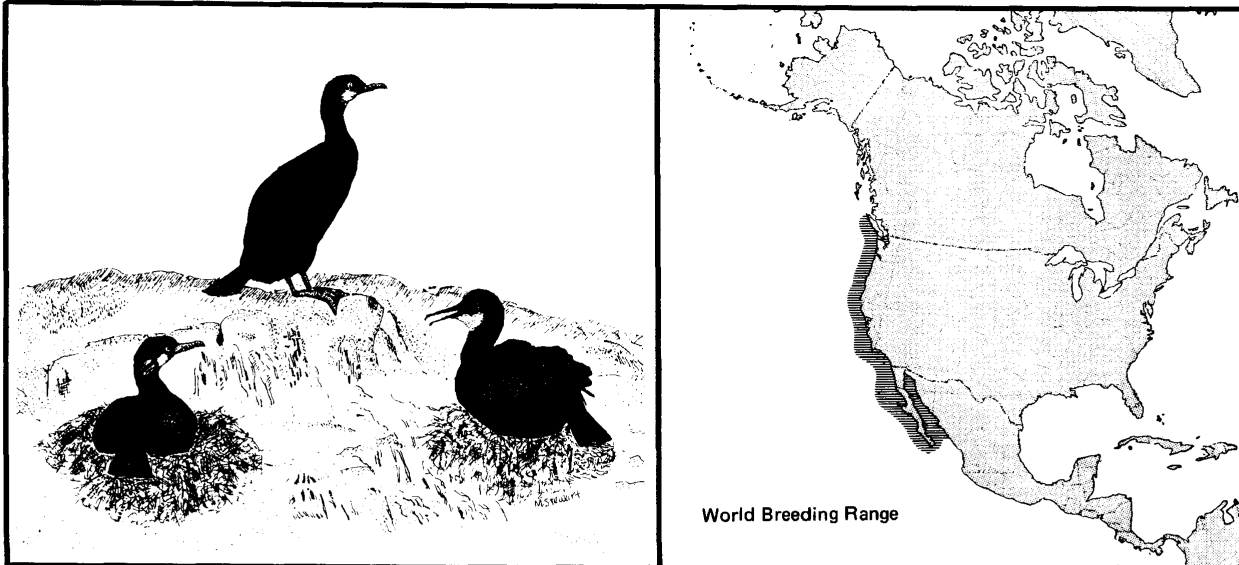


Brandt's Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*)

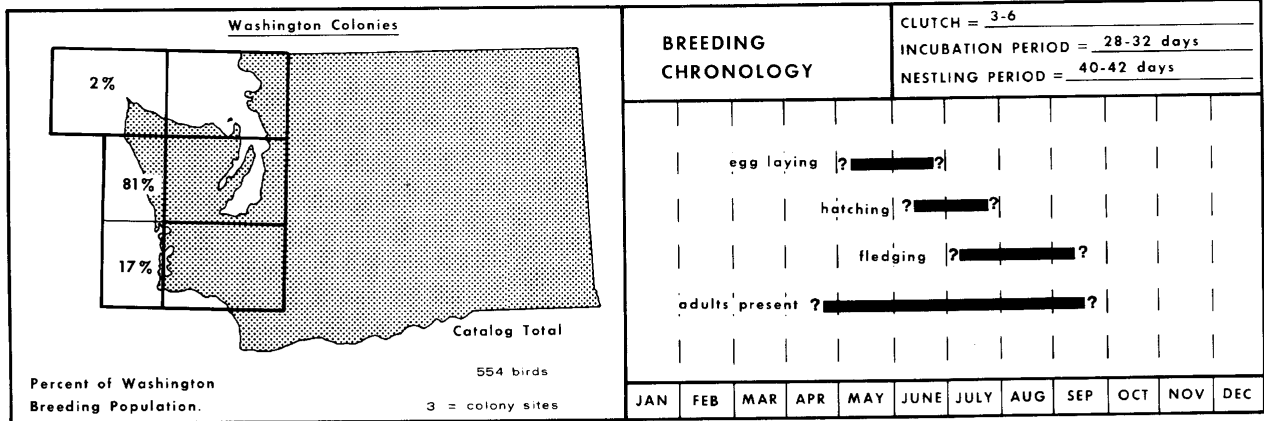


Brandt's Cormorants are among the most conspicuous seabirds in Washington waters during most of the year, but this species is one of the least numerous breeding birds in the State. Large numbers breed along the Pacific coast of Baja California, California, and Oregon. The northernmost sizeable colonies in the species' range are found on the western side of Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Hatler et al. 1978). There has been a small colony at Prince William Sound, Alaska, since 1972 (Kessell and Gibson 1978). Birds from these colonies apparently winter in the coastal waters and the deeper channels and passages of the protected waters of Washington. A few nonbreeders are found locally during the summer in the State, roosting and foraging in traditional cormorant habitats (Wahl et al. 1981).

Brandt's Cormorants usually nest on offshore islands or, less

frequently, on inaccessible mainland bluffs and wide cliff ledges near the water above the splash zone. During the breeding season, these cormorants present a striking appearance with their bright blue throat pouches and white feather plumes on the sides of their heads. At colonies, Brandt's Cormorants are opportunistic gatherers of nesting material (Hunt et al. 1979). They collect nearby herbaceous plants and pluck seaweeds from close tidal rocks. Once nests are constructed, continual additions are made, often with material stolen from neighboring nests (Palmer 1962).

Young Brandt's Cormorants are born without feathers but soon are covered with coal-black down. Nestlings feed by inserting their heads down the throats of their parents and removing partly digested fish remains.



Strong swimmers and divers, Brandt's Cormorants prey on various species of fish (Hubbs et al. 1970; Scott 1973; Baltz and Morejohn 1977). Clay (1911) reported Brandt's Cormorants caught in fishing nets at depths as great as 70 meters. These cormorants often feed in large flocks in deep waters with strong tidal currents and frequently feed with loons, gulls, murre, and other alcids (Wahl et al. 1981).

WASHINGTON COLONIES

While Brandt's Cormorants often form large colonies elsewhere, they nest in small numbers in Washington. There are only four sites recently used for nesting by this species in Washington, all on the outer coast. These include the cliffs at Cape Disappointment, Paahwoke-it, Willoughby Island, and Split Rock. The estimated total number of Brandt's Cormorants nesting in Washington is probably reasonably accurate.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

This species apparently has never been numerous or widespread

as a breeding bird in Washington. Historically, there are reports of birds nesting at Paawoke-it and Grenville Arch and Sea Lion Rock in 1906/1907 (Dawson 1908) in small numbers.

Brandt's Cormorants are believed to have suffered reproductive failure from thin eggshells caused by accumulation of pesticide residues (Hunt et al. 1979), though whether the same situation may have occurred in Washington is unknown. Cormorants in North America have generally been affected by human disturbance, especially during the nesting season. Adults flush from their nests readily when approached by boats, low flying aircraft, or humans on foot. Once parents are away from the nests, gulls are able to prey upon eggs and chicks. Repeated disturbance can cause permanent colony desertion.

Observed cormorant deaths from oil spills are not frequent (Wahl et al. 1981), and it may be that cormorants, which spend proportionately more time out of the water than other diving birds, avoid oil spills more easily. However, the relatively low numbers of oiled cormorants found

on beaches could be due to a greater tendency of cormorants to sink because they lack the waterproof plumage of other seabirds.

FIELD NOTES

The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates