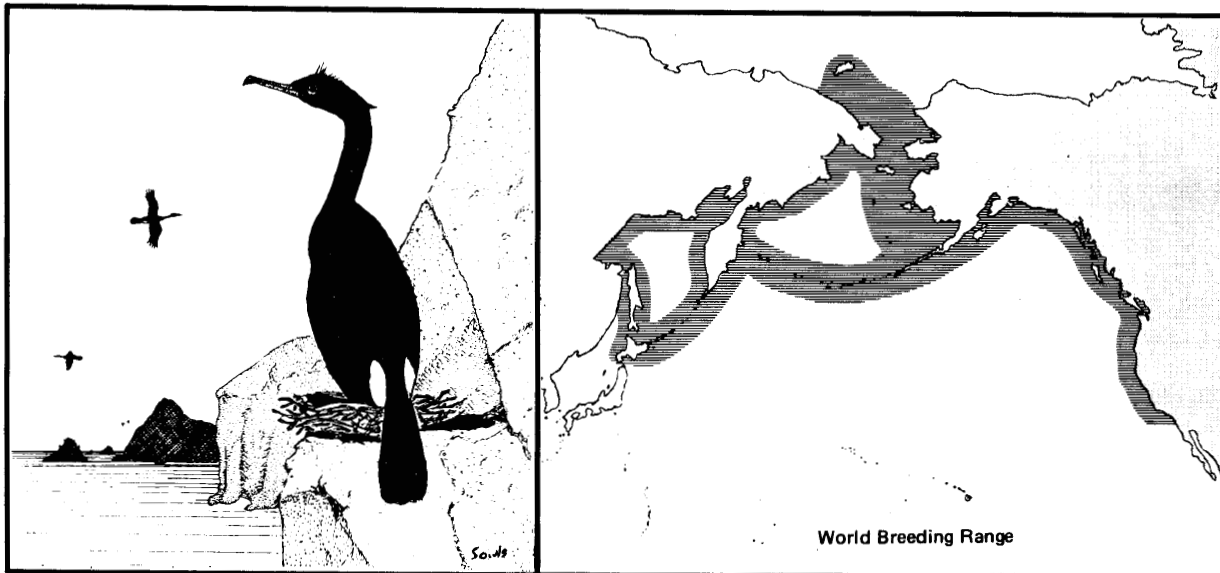


Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*)

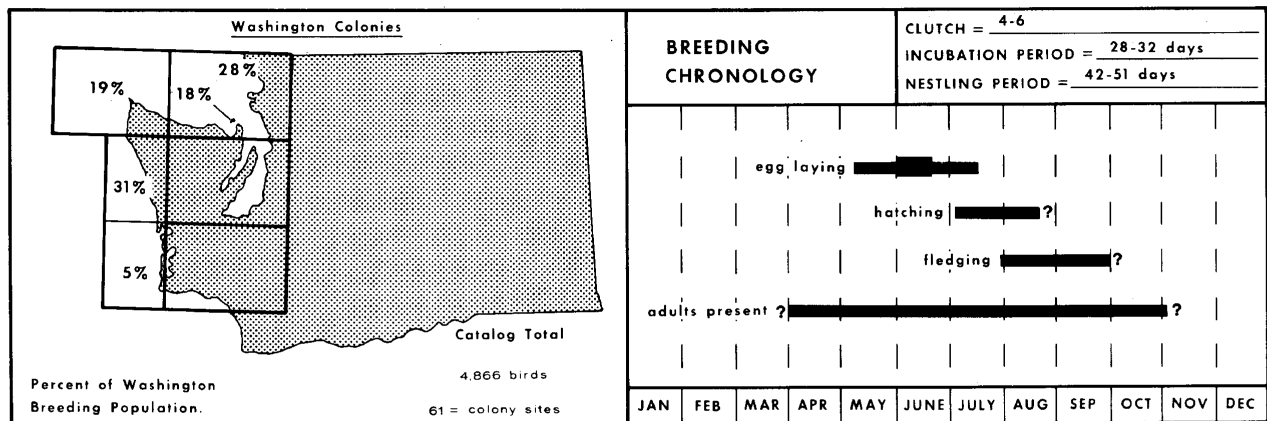


Pelagic Cormorants are the most widespread nesting cormorants in Washington and, while they are seldom seen in large flocks like Brandt's Cormorants or Double-crested Cormorants, they are commonly seen foraging in many areas along the outer coast and inland marine waters of Washington. These small cormorants can be seen at any season along rocky shorelines around kelp beds and tidal channels where they propel themselves underwater with their strong webbed feet in pursuit of fish and shrimp (Robertson 1974; Hatler et al. 1978). Clay (1911) reported that Pelagic Cormorants are capable of diving to depths of up to 140 meters.

Pelagic Cormorants nest in solitary pairs, scattered groups, and colonies of up to hundreds. While some sites appear to be traditional and are occupied each year, the locations of others may

shift from one year to the next (Benz and Garrett 1978; Nysewander and Barbour 1979). With nests anywhere from hundreds of feet above the ocean to just within the spray zone, Pelagic Cormorants raise their young in platform nests of seaweed built on small outcrops and ledges. These cliffside colonies stand out because of the summer whitewash they receive and can be seen for great distances. In Washington, Pelagic Cormorants also nest inside sea caves on narrow ledges, on vertical cliff faces, on top of dolphins (at Port Angeles), on abandoned piers, and on an off-shore navigation marker tower.

Pelagic Cormorants are often found nesting near other cormorants. In these locations, direct competition is apparently reduced by staggered nesting chronologies, by differences in nest site selection, behavior, and



in selection of food types, sizes, and feeding locations (Robertson 1974; Benz and Garrett 1978).

WASHINGTON COLONIES

Pelagic Cormorants nest in suitable locations along the entire coast of Washington, from the northern San Juan Islands and the Strait of Juan de Fuca south along the outer coast to Cape Disappointment at the mouth of the Columbia River. They nest at 63 locations, most of them on offshore rocks, islands and human-made structures; relatively few nest on mainland cliffs. While there are many small colonies, a few larger ones at Cape Disappointment, Paahwoke-it, Tatoosh, Protection, Smith, Colville, and Castle Islands make up almost one-half of the total nesting population. The total estimated nesting population is likely reasonably close to actual numbers.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

Pelagic Cormorants were noted by the earliest of the naturalists

who visited Washington. The colony at Cape Disappointment, for example, appears to have been active for over 100 years. However, the tendency of this and other cormorant species to shift breeding locations makes interpretation of historical records, which lack simultaneous, state-wide coverage, difficult if not impossible.

This species and the Double-crested Cormorant both suffered depressed populations in the past when cormorants were not protected because they were considered a menace to commercial fishing.

Shoreline use and development pose threats to cormorants. They can be easily disturbed by any human activity near colonies. Approach to nesting birds by aircraft, boats, and humans on foot may force adults off their nests, leaving eggs and young chicks unprotected. Chicks and eggs may be knocked from nests by frightened adults, with gulls, crows, and ravens then preying on eggs or young. Eagles also visit colonies in Washington frequently and, while they are mobbed by

gulls on such occasions, they may prey on young cormorants.

Pelagic Cormorants, like other members of the order Pelecaniformes, may be vulnerable to pesticide pollution. The eggshell thinning, egg breakage, and subsequent nesting failure and population declines experienced by other species in California (Gress et al. 1973) have not been documented for this species (Hunt et al. 1979).

Oil spills have resulted in few known cormorant deaths to date in Washington (Richardson 1956). Because of their widespread distribution and ability to shift colony sites, Pelagic Cormorant populations may be relatively resistant to localized oil slicks. Their habit of spending nights and much of the day roosting out of the water may reduce vulnerability to oil pollution (Smail et al. 1972).

FIELD NOTES

The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates
