PELAGIC CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: High **N. AMERICAN: High Risk** **GLOBAL: Least Concern**

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
June-Sept	3-7	26-31 d	47-49 d	cliff, ground, sticks	surface dive	fish, marine invertebrates

Life History and Distribution

The Pelagic Cormorant *(Phalacrocorax pelagicus)* is noticeably smaller and slimmer than the three other species of cormorants breeding in Alaska. Pelagic and Red-faced *(Phalacrocorax urile)* Cormorants are similar in their appearance. During the winter, they look nearly identical except the Red-faced Cormorant is slightly larger. However, in the spring the birds begin to dress-up for the breeding season and the two species can be more easily separated by their appearance. Pelagic Cormorants develop a patch of dark red skin around their eyes and base of the bill, a conspicuous white patch on each flank, and purplish and greenish highlights. They often develop long white plumes on their necks. Red-faced Cormorants develop a patch of reddish-orange skin around their eyes that extends up onto their foreheads and the base of their bill turns light blue. Both species have two crests on their heads but these are much more obvious on Red-faced Cormorants.

Pelagic Cormorants are among the least gregarious or social of the cormorants. They nest in small dispersed colonies on cliffs of rocky islands and headlands, but also in sea caves, on driftwood logs, pilings, and man-made structures. Typically, they place their nests on narrow ledges and in shallow hollows on the steepest and tallest rock faces available, often in areas with other species of cormorants. The nests are constructed of sticks, marine algae, grass, moss, and debris which they cement together and onto the precarious ledge with their excrement. Nests are reused from year to year.

The name Pelagic Cormorant is misleading as the species prefers nearshore areas year-round, where it feeds primarily on solitary fish and invertebrates on the bottom.

Breeding occurs from the arctic waters of the Chukchi and Bering Seas, south along the North American Coast to Baja California. It also breeds along the Asian coast to southern China.

In Alaska, the northernmost breeding colony is at Cape Lisburne in the northern Chukchi Sea. There are colony sites scattered throughout the Bering Strait, including Little Diomede Island, and south to St. Lawrence and St. Matthew islands in the Bering Sea. Colonies are also found along the Alaskan coast at Kodiak Island, Homer, Kachemak Bay, Cook Inlet, and south throughout the Alexander Archipelago in Southeast Alaska.

Winter migration occurs primarily in the northern populations, probably as a response to pack ice. Alaskan breeding birds are found regularly from the Pribilof Islands south and throughout the Aleutian Islands. Small numbers are reported in winter north to St. Matthew, St. Lawrence, and Little Diomede Island and some birds reside year-round throughout the Gulf of Alaska. This species may be found in winter south along the Pacific Coast to Baja California.

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Alaska Seasonal Distribution

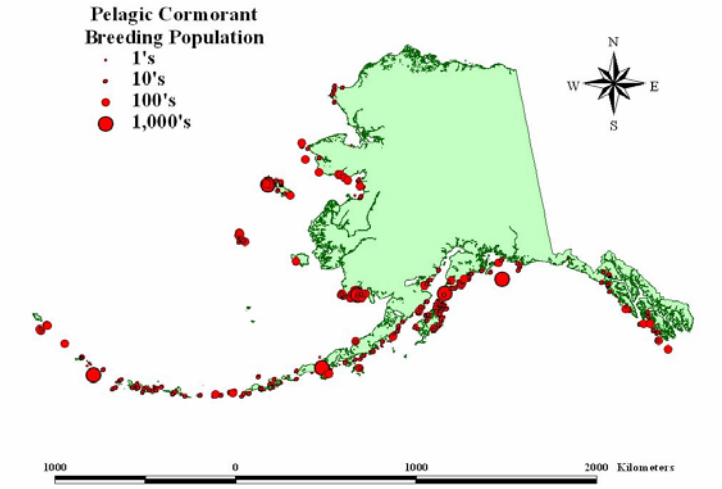
AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern *	C	U	C	C
Southcoastal *	C	C	C	C
Southwestern *	C	C	C	C
Central	-	-	-	-
Western *	C	C	C	+
Northern	-	R	+	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, + = Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb.

Population Estimates and Trends

The estimated world breeding population is 400,000 birds, with about one third occurring in North America. However, numbers are roughly known. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Beringian Seabird Colony Catalog lists ~ 43,700 individuals at 420 colonies in Alaska.

Cormorants are known to shift nesting locations between years, so it is difficult to confidently interpret changes in counts. In Alaska, the numbers of Pelagic Cormorants or nests (the index used at some sites) have remained relatively stable at most monitored sites.



Seabird breeding population maps created from data provided by the Beringian Seabird Colony Catalog Database. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska.

However, at Chiniak Bay off of Kodiak Island, there was a significant negative trend (-5.5% per annum) between 1975 and 2003 and St. Lazaria Island in Southeast Alaska showed an increase (+38.6% per annum) between 1994-2002. At some colonies in Alaska, cormorant species are combined for counts. Most sites where cormorant species are combined showed no trends, but Shemya Island in the Aleutian Islands declined (-12.9% per annum) between 1988 and 2001and Kasatochi Island, also in the Aleutians, exhibited a positive trend of +4.2% per annum between 1980 and 2003.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

Like most cormorants, this species is vulnerable to oil pollution and other contaminants. Pelagic Cormorants likely suffered high mortality relative to the size of local populations from the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989. Additionally, of 19 species studied in Alaska from 1973-1976, Pelagic Cormorants had the highest frequency of organochlorine residues (pesticides).

Another effect of human activity is hunting. Recent data for Native subsistence hunting and egging are not available specifically for Pelagic Cormorants. However, subsistence harvest data are available for cormorants in general. In Alaska, 1,753 adult cormorants and 22 eggs were collected annually from 1995-2000. In areas where Pelagic Cormorants are found, they may be included in the take.

Pelagic Cormorants may drown in gillnets where fisheries overlap with feeding areas. Little is known about fisheries occurring in Pelagic Cormorant habitat or the extent of the impact. The interaction of nearshore fisheries with cormorants could be significant. Data are few, but some incidental mortality was recorded from the set gillnet fishery for Kodiak Island for 2002. The total bycatch estimate for Pelagic Cormorants was 14 individuals. Although Pelagic Cormorants and Red-faced Cormorants comprised only 1% of all colonial birds on Kodiak Island, they comprised 9% of the total bycatch.

The species is sensitive to disturbance at nesting sites. Adults may flush from nests, exposing eggs or chicks to predators and the elements. This issue is important in areas that are experiencing increased recreational activity.

Recommended Management Actions

- Continue monitoring Pelagic Cormorants in Alaska at geographically-dispersed breeding sites.
- Protect colonies and important roosting sites from human disturbance.
- Continue to work with state and federal agencies and fisheries councils to better understand and minimize the negative impacts of fisheries interactions
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBCC) to monitor and regulate subsistence use of Pelagic Cormorants.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and roosting areas and measure contaminants in Pelagic Cormorant eggs.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; Dragoo *et al*. In Press; Hobson 1997; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; Manly *et al.* 2003; Piatt *et al.* 1990; Stephensen and Irons 2003; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Internet Website (2005).

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