# RED-FACED CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax urile*

### Conservation Status

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

| Breed | Eggs | Incubation | Fledge | Nest | Feeding Behavior | Diet |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| May-Aug | 2-4 | 27-34 d | 40-60 d | cliff ledge | surface dive | bottom fish, crab, shrimp |

## Life History and Distribution

Red-faced Cormorants *(Phalacrocorax urile)* are one of the least studied birds in the North Pacific, possibly because they are shy and nest in small, widely dispersed colonies on steep, inaccessible cliff faces. Never venturing far from the sea, they come to land only to breed or roost.

They are a medium-sized cormorant with blackish plumage. During the breeding season, adults have a double crest on the head and neck, white hair-like feathers on the neck and shoulder area, a white patch on the side of the body, and bright red facial skin. The inside of the mouth is sky blue and the fleshy area around the mouth is a paler blue. Males and females are similar in appearance. A very similar species is the Pelagic Cormorant *(Phalacrocorax pelagicus)* and in areas where the two are found together, they are often confused. The Red-Faced Cormorant can be identified by a lack of feathers on the forehead (feathered in Pelagic), brighter and more extensive red facial skin and a light brown to dark-yellow bill (blackish or dark gray in Pelagic). It is also larger and 20-25% heavier than the Pelagic Cormorant.

The preferred diet of the Red-faced Cormorant is solitary fish or invertebrates found near the bottom. They feed by pursuing their prey underwater using their feet for propulsion.

Nest material is mostly grass and seaweed cemented together with guano; moss, feathers and some sticks may also be used. Offering of nest material to the incubating adult is a part of the pair maintenance and nests continue to grow during the breeding season.

Breeding occurs in a narrow band from the Gulf of Alaska to the central and western Aleutian Islands, through the southern Bering Sea to Russian, and on to the northern Sea of Japan. In Alaska, there are also nesting sites on the Pribilof Islands and in Norton Sound.

The species is not migratory, but the postbreeding distribution is not well known. A few winter observations indicate that adults and immature birds disperse and feed near breeding areas.

USFWS Donna Dewhurst

### Alaska Seasonal Distribution

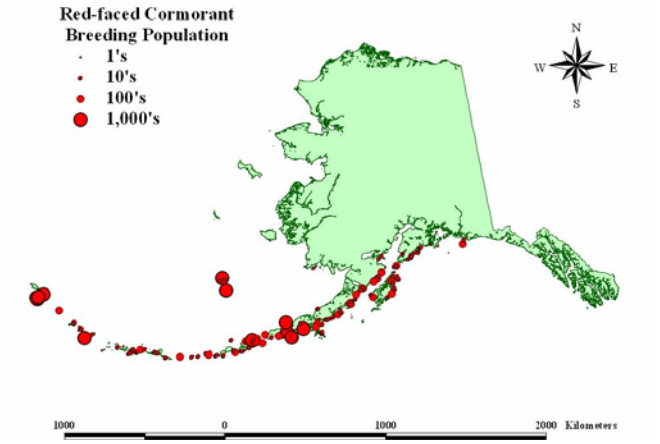
| AK Region | Sp | S | F | W |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Southeastern | - | - | - | + |
| Southcoastal * | C | C | C | C |
| Southwestern * | C | C | C | C |
| Central | - | - | - | - |
| Western | - | + | - | - |
| Northern | - | - | - | - |

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 size of the world breeding population is roughly known, but is estimated at 155,000 individuals. In North America, the largest colonies are in the western Aleutian Islands. Recent Alaskan estimates are approximately 20,000 birds.

Movement of colony locations may result in high annual variation in numbers between years. Incomplete census data and problems with determining numbers make identification of trends problematic. Generally, Alaskan populations are thought to have decreased in the western and central Aleutian Islands and increased in the Gulf of Alaska. For population monitoring purposes, Red-faced Cormorants were differentiated from other cormorant




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

species at only two colonies: the Semidi Islands, southwest of Kodiak Island and Chiniak Bay, off northeastern Kodiak Island). The Semidi Island colony showed a significant annual decline of -4.2% and the Chiniak Bay colony showed a -12.8% per annum decline.

No trend information is available for Russian or Japanese populations.

## Conservation Concerns and Actions

This species is a conservation concern because the cause for population declines and the issues preventing population recovery are unknown. Several issues are considered as possible threats to the population.

Little is known about fisheries occurring in Red-faced Cormorant habitat and the extent of the impact. However, the interaction of nearshore fisheries with cormorants may be significant. Data are few, but some bycatch mortality was recorded from the set gillnet fishery for Kodiak Island for 2002. The total bycatch estimate for Red-faced Cormorants was 28 individuals.

Cormorants are known to be extremely sensitive to local environmental conditions and disturbance at nesting and roosting sites. They may change sites, even undertake mass colony moves, when local conditions change significantly. Some causes of disruption might be changes in food availability, oil pollution or contaminants, human disturbance, and predators.

In early times, cormorants were considered as a winter food by native Aleut peoples. Some hunting and egging still occur today. Recent data for subsistence hunting and egging are not available specifically for Red-faced 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 Red-faced Cormorants are found they may be included in the take.

A major source for mortality at various colonies is considered to be predation by both natural and introduced predators, including gulls *(Larus spp.)*, foxes *(Vulpes vulpes* and *Alopex lagopus)*, and possibly Norway rats *(*Rattus norvegicus*)*. Numbers of cormorants were probably reduced on some Aleutian Islands by the introduction of foxes in the 1800s. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rid many islands of foxes and cormorant populations have increased at these sites. Some islands still have introduced fox populations.

Cormorants were shown to be vulnerable to oiling following the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Carcasses of 161 Red-faced Cormorants were collected and counts of all cormorant species in the oil spill area were lower after the spill.

All cormorants investigated have been shown to be sensitive to the effects of DDT (organic pesticide) and its derivatives, but contaminant levels in Alaskan cormorants are unknown.

## Recommended Management Actions

- Restore Red-faced Cormorant populations in Alaska to 50,000 individuals.
- Establish a monitoring program.
- Survey populations at key index locations.
- Measure shifts in nesting colonies, adult mortality, reproductive success, and other vital rates.
- Evaluate disease as a factor in population declines cycle.
- Evaluate prey abundance variability.
- Reduce mortality related to fishing and fishing gear.
    - Learn more about fisheries occurring in Red-faced Cormorants habitat and the extent of the interaction.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBCC) to monitor and regulate subsistence use of Red-faced Cormorants.
- Assess other human disturbance at key colonies.
- Evaluate and control predation, particularly, by foxes and rats.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and roosting areas and measure contaminants in Red-faced Cormorant eggs.

## Regional Contact

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## *References*

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

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