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EDITORIAL

Oneida Lake's Cormorant Harassment Program Frequently Asked Questions

by Travis DeVault

Editor's Note – Oneida Lake's cormorant harassment program, which began in 1998, is an outstanding example of an effective government response to environmental problems. This program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services Division, has contributed mightily to a major resurgence in the lake's game fish populations during the past three years.

In the following article, USDA biologist Travis DeVault answers questions that often arise about the harassment program.



What kind of birds are cormorants?

Although cormorants resemble ducks, they are more closely related to pelicans and several other types of fish-eating birds that live in coastal areas across the world. The double-crested cormorant, which inhabits Oneida Lake, is the most widespread and abundant of six North American species of cormorants. Cormorants eat fish almost exclusively, which they capture during underwater pursuit. Research by a Cornell University biologist has demonstrated that double-crested cormorants are capable of diving to depths over 75 feet. Thus, all of Oneida Lake is accessible to them.

Where did all these birds come from? Have they always been so numerous?

Double-crested cormorants are native to the United States and Canada. Their population has undergone dramatic fluctuations over the past century. It is not completely certain, however, whether cormorants originally nested in the Great Lakes ecosystem, including Oneida Lake. The first documented nesting record for double-crested cormorants in the Great Lakes was in 1913 on the western end of Lake Superior; from there, they spread eastward to colonize the other Great Lakes.

Many wildlife biologists now believe

that double-crested cormorants did not nest in the Great Lakes historically, but rather expanded their range east from the Great Plains into the Great Lakes from the 1910s through the late 1930s. By the early 1950s, cormorants were common throughout much of the Great Lakes, although their numbers declined tremendously from the 1950s through the mid-1970s due to contamination from agricultural pesticides (DDT) that damaged their eggs. By 1973, breeding cormorants had disappeared completely from Lakes Michigan and Superior, and were scarce elsewhere in the Great Lakes.

Nineteenth century surveys indicate that cormorants were seldom seen on Oneida Lake. Indeed, the *Roosevelt Wildlife Annals'* bird census for the lake, published in 1927, makes no mention of double-crested cormorants.

Why are cormorants so abundant now?

In the mid 1970s, cormorants began a dramatic recovery throughout the Great Lakes ecosystem, doubling their population size every three years from 1973 through 1991. Cormorants are now many times more numerous than they were during their previous peak in the Great Lakes around 1950. Estimates of the total Great Lakes population presently range from 350,000 to 475,000.

Undoubtedly, government regulations that reduced, and then completely eliminated, use of DDT contributed to this population explosion. Some wildlife biologists also believe that changes in Great Lakes fish communities, including the proliferation of exotic species like alewives, benefited cormorants. The growth of catfish farming in the southeastern United States also has provided abundant food for cormorants during winter months.

Double-crested cormorants are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and thus the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regulates the taking of birds, eggs, and nests.

Do the cormorants we see on Oneida Lake breed here?

Cormorants move around a lot. Nesting cormorants, captured and fitted with satellite tracking devices at Oneida Lake, have been located during the breeding season on Lake Ontario, Lake Champlain, the St. Lawrence River, and other locations. The majority of cormorants that are seen on Oneida Lake in the spring after ice-out are only passing by (and "refueling" by eating the lake's fish) during their migration from the southern United States to breeding grounds elsewhere in the Great Lakes ecosystem. Many of the same birds also stop over on Oneida Lake during their fall migration.

Management efforts have reduced the number of cormorant nesting attempts on Oneida Lake from over 300 in the late 1990s to only about 20 nests presently. This represents tremendous progress.

How does the USDA cormorant program work on Oneida Lake?

Cormorant management at Oneida Lake is primarily a non-lethal program. From ice-out until migration winds down in late September, Wildlife Services' employees use boat chases, pyrotechnics, nest control, and limited lethal removal to reduce cormorant numbers on the lake. In 2006 at Oneida Lake, 8,461 pyrotechnics (fireworks and other noise makers) were
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FAQs

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used to harass 49,464 cormorants (many individuals were harassed multiple times), and forty-eight cormorants were lethally removed.

The program has been extremely effective. In 2006, Wildlife Services biologists counted an average of 108 cormorants on Oneida Lake from April through September, and, during much of the summer, fewer than 100 birds were found on the lake. In the mid 1990s, before cormorant management began, surveys by Cornell University biologists indicated that several hundred cormorants used the lake throughout the summer months, and counts of 2,000 or more were common during the fall.

Aren't you just moving the cormorant problem somewhere else?

Cormorants dispersed from Oneida Lake certainly have to go somewhere. Non-lethal management programs such as ours are intended to disperse birds to multiple areas, so no individual location is affected adversely to a significant degree.

During the first few years of the management program at Oneida Lake, many cormorants relocated to nearby Onondaga Lake. Since 2004, however, USDA biologists have harassed cormorants at Onondaga Lake as well, and cormorant use of that lake has been reduced substantially.

Recent research has demonstrated that many birds harassed at Oneida and Onondaga Lakes have dispersed widely to various locations in Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River, and elsewhere. Some harassed birds have migrated south earlier in the year than expected.

Why can't we use cormorant management money for other things, such as building new boat ramps?

The USDA Wildlife Services' program in New York is charged by Congress to conduct management, monitoring, and research to ensure that cormorants do not adversely affect fish populations in Oneida

Lake. Money appropriated by Congress for the Oneida Lake cormorant program must be used towards this goal and within the parameters set by Congress.

In addition to the Oneida Lake management activities and research, Wildlife Services is conducting other innovative activities. For example, research is currently underway to evaluate the benefits of the USDA Wildlife Services' cormorant program on the Central New York economy.

Are there any other management options? Why don't you just shoot them all? What about starting a hunting season on cormorants?

In 1996 and again in 2003, the New York State DEC convened a "Citizens Task Force" meeting to involve the public in the decision-making process concerning cormorant management. The resulting management plan is being implemented currently by USDA Wildlife Services at Oneida Lake.

Management programs consisting

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primarily of lethal removal have been used in other areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered a hunting season, but rejected the idea because of concerns about the ethics of hunting a non-edible species, and administrative/legal issues. In addition, cormorants can be difficult to hunt; harassment/removal by trained professionals has proven to be the most effective method.

What will occur if we stop managing cormorants at Oneida Lake?

Because of its sizeable fish populations and location near other large bodies of water, Oneida Lake is prime habitat for fish-eating birds like cormorants. There are 350,000 to 475,000 cormorants on the Great Lakes. Given the birds' ability to move long distances, cormorant numbers at Oneida Lake likely would increase rapidly if management stopped. Judging from what happened during the 1990s and early 2000s, severe drops in fish populations would probably occur.

Purple Martins Renew Historic Nest at Constantia

by Bob Gang

Purple martins are beautiful birds that prefer to nest in houses constructed by people. Bucky Darrh, former owner of the Vanderbilt Hotel in Constantia, built several intricate martin houses and installed them on the hotel's lakeside lot during the 1930s and 1940s. The "Vanderbilt martin colony" became regionally famous among New York birders.

Darrh's legacy lives on in Constantia. Last spring, Bucky's grandson Walter Darrh, aided by Tom Schluder, added a personally crafted martin house to the older structures along the village's lakefront. Birds thrive in the houses and an Oneida Lake ornithological tradition endures. The martin colony can be viewed on the lot between the Constantia library and the lake. Hats off to Walt and Tom for their contribution to enhancing Oneida Lake's environment!

