



Double-crested cormorants are about 32 inches long with 52-inch wingspans. They can dive to 25 to 30 feet, propel themselves with webbed feet as fast as the fish they pursue, and hold their breath for a minute or more. They have a distinctive turquoise color eye and yellow-orange bill but otherwise are a drab bird.



A section of West Sister Island on June 17, 2002



The same section of the island on July 28, 2005 after the invasion of cormorants.

The birds destroy habitat and may deplete fisheries

The problem with Lake Erie's Cormorants

Outdoors Page by Steve Pollick and Jeff Basting

"Double-crested cormorant" is either a large, dark, fish-eating waterbird or, figuratively, a four-letter word.

To many sport fishermen across the Great Lakes and around the country, it is the latter. It also may be the latter to government conservationists struggling to save fragile, cormorant-endangered habitat on western Lake Erie islands.

It would be great if the cormorant story of recovery could be a mythical phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes tale. After all, the cormorant had not nested on Lake Erie for nearly a century and was the victim of chemical pollution which interfered with its reproduction.

As recently as 1990 there were no nesting pairs of cormorants on Lake Erie's West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge, Ohio's only federal wilderness and part of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

The 82-acre island, nine miles off Jerusalem Township, harbors the most important colonial wading-bird rookeries on the Great Lakes. It is home to hundreds of great blue herons, black-crowned night herons, and great egrets.

In 1992, when 186 pairs of cormorants showed up at West Sister, it was thought a victory in the battle against pollution.

But the rising phoenix turned into a winged dragon. Their numbers just didn't stop multiplying. By 2000 there were 2,200 pairs and last year 3,813. Green Island, a 17-acre state wildlife refuge just off South Bass Island, had no pairs in 2003 and an unbelievable 857 pairs in 2005. The tiny Turning Point Island in Sandusky harbor has another 409 pairs.

Two state endangered species [snowy egret and cattle egret], a state threatened species [black-crowned night heron], and a species of special concern [great egret] also are found on West Sister and Turning Point. Besides displacement of other species, cormorants are chemically burning up the tree canopy with their potent droppings, or guano, and they physically are stripping trees and breaking branches as well.

Threats from nesting cormorants are compounded by those of 25,000 to 100,000 migrating cormorants that congregate in Erie's western basin between August and October from around the Great Lakes and perhaps even the Prairies.

"You look at the vegetation damage out there," said Doug Brewer, manager of the Ottawa refuge complex, about West Sister. "We need to take some action before West Sister looks like Middle Island. We have a wilderness to conserve."

Middle Island, on the Ontario side of the international border north of Ohio's Kelleys Island, has been all but denuded by the cormorant explosion. It is virtually mobbed by 6,000 pairs. East Sister Island, also in Canadian waters, has been hit nearly as badly.

"It would be a crying shame to turn that island into a rock," said Mark Shieldcastle about Green Island. Project leader at the state's

Crane Creek Wildlife Research Station in Ottawa County, Mr. Shieldcastle is one of the chief architects of a proposed federal-state plan to control cormorant numbers.

State and federal wildlife managers have been carefully assembling a management plan under a broad 2003 depredation order by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Careful steps are necessary because the cormorant is protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Recently an environmental assessment was released for public comment offering five options for managing cormorants in Ohio. [There are two smaller populations besides Lake Erie — five pairs at the Portage Lakes near Akron and about 80 pairs at the Mercer State Wildlife Area in Mercer County on Grand Lake St. Marys.]

The management alternatives range from doing nothing to the preferred alternative. The latter proposes an integrated approach that includes, when and where appropriate, physical exclusion, habitat modification or harassment, and culling of cormorants by shooting, egg oiling or destruction, nest destruction, or euthanasia.

The measures sound drastic, Mr. Shieldcastle notes. "[But] it is irresponsible to do nothing."

Some 500 birds were culled under a scientific collecting permit in 2005, 250 each from West Sister and Green islands. West Sister ended with a net gain of two nests over 2004, and not a dent was made at Green Island.

If the terrestrial damage on fragile islands were not enough, cormorants also have decimated fisheries in some bays and corners of the Great Lakes and beyond, and gutted southern fish farms.

"Obviously they are fish-eating birds and their potential for impacting local stocks of such preferred species as yellow perch, walleye, and smallmouth bass is there, even though we cannot demonstrate it with our fisheries surveys," summed up Jeff Tyson, supervisor of Lake Erie fisheries research for the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

So far — and more studies are scheduled — it appears that cormorants are pure opportunists when it comes to appetite. They eat what is most available, usually gizzard shad and emerald shiners, both forage fish, in Lake Erie. But sport fishermen — whose preferred catches already are challenged by the impacts of zebra mussels, round gobies, and plain unfavorable years of reproduction because of bad weather — generally have nothing nice to say about cormorants. They generally blame the birds for poor fishing.

Mr. Tyson said that a federal finding on the environmental assessment is expected in March and that will determine which alternative may be used. "It's a situation of trying to keep the species in balance with everything else," added Mr. Shieldcastle.

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Large populations of cormorants ruin foliage.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OHIO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE, U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE/IRON HUFFMAN, BLACK SWAMP BIRD OBSERVATORY, AND TIM DANIEL

Cormorants consume large quantities of whatever fish are most available.

- Ohio has five cormorant colonies: West Sister Island, Green Island, and Turning Point Island, all in western Lake Erie; Mercer Wildlife Area in Mercer County, and Portage Lakes State Park near Akron.
- Cormorants have a negative impact on vegetation both chemically (guano) and physically (stripping leaves and breaking branches).
- Until 1991, nesting cormorants were absent from Lake Erie for nearly a century because of pollution.
- Recent studies by Cornell University on Lake Oneida in New York showed a 58 percent survival of juvenile walleye and yellow perch with losses linked to cormorant predation.



Snowy egret



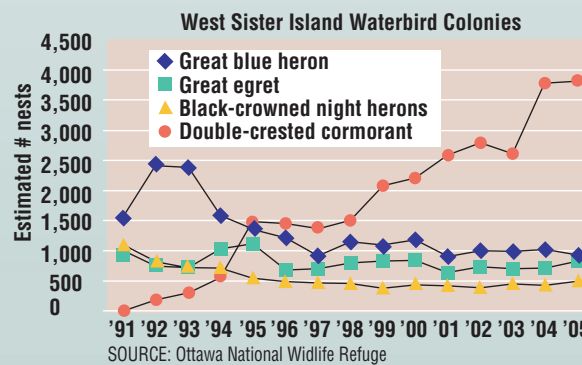
Great blue heron



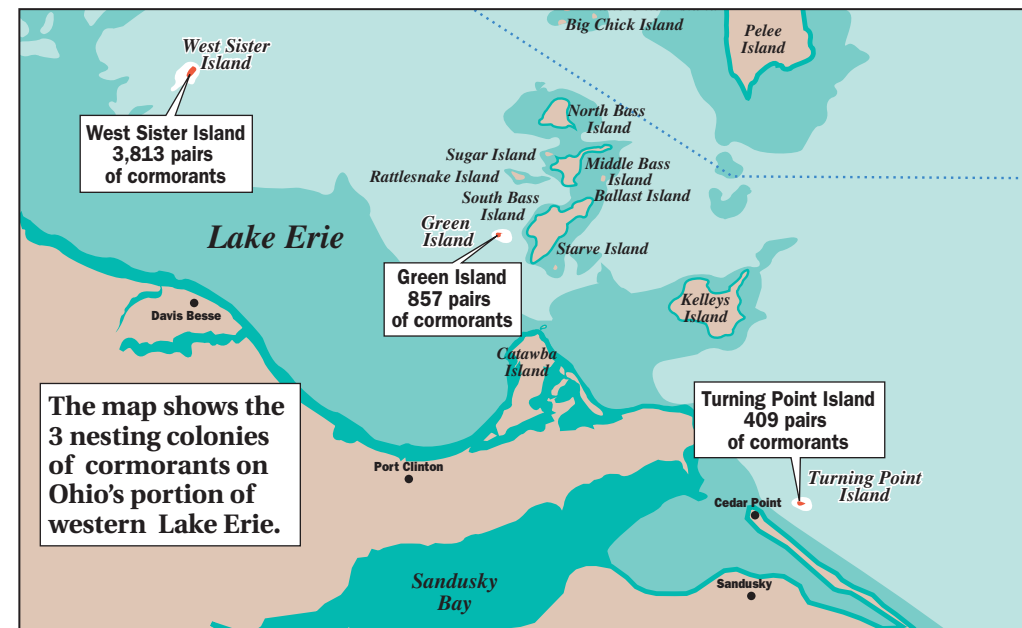
Black-crowned night heron

Two state endangered species (snowy egret and cattle egret), one state threatened species (black-crowned night heron), and one species of special concern (great egret) are found on West Sister Island and Turning Point Island. Their nesting areas are threatened by cormorants.

The draft environmental assessment on cormorants can be viewed at the federal Web site, www.fws.gov/midwest/MidwestBird/cormorants.htm. For a copy from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services, Reynoldsburg, Ohio, call 614-861-6087.



Cormorants nests in partially denuded trees.



The map shows the 3 nesting colonies of cormorants on Ohio's portion of western Lake Erie.