



SPECIES FACT SHEET

Pied cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius*

Classification:

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Aves
Order:	Pelecaniformes
Family:	Phalacrocoracidae
Genus:	<i>Phalacrocorax</i>
Species:	<i>varius</i>



Conservation Status: Least Concern

Identification and Distribution: Cormorants are a group of diving birds that can be found in many coastal and estuarine habitats of the tropics and temperate zone. Cormorants are strong swimmers and are capable of capturing fast-swimming fish. They have denser bones than most birds, allowing them to dive a bit easier. Their outer layer of feathers also lacks the water resistance of normal birds, allowing them to further decrease their buoyancy while in the water and on a dive. On top of that, cormorants may ingest small stones to allow them to submerge more easily. While at the surface, their fully webbed feet help them navigate in search of good foraging grounds. They also act as skis to soften water landings and assist in taking off by pushing their heavy bodies off the water's surface. In Australia and New Zealand, one of the species that you can find quite often is the pied cormorant, also known as the yellow-faced cormorant. They have a dark brown to black coloration that extends from the top of the head down the entire dorsal surface and wings. The lateral and ventral portions of the head and neck along with the rest of the underbelly are white and a yellow area of plumage directly surrounds their eyes. Pied cormorants are very common in Shark Bay. They can be found individually or in groups foraging in the waters over or near seagrass beds. While on land, they often form large groups on the beach or sand bars and are sometimes seen with wings outspread, a strategy used to dry their waterlogged feathers.

Growth, Age, and Reproduction: Cormorants are colonial nesters and build nests out of seagrass, algae, twigs and other small debris either on dunes or in trees near the shoreline. 1-5 eggs are laid and both parents play a role in incubating the eggs and feeding the young. Eggs hatch in about 25 days and young are independent of their parents after ten weeks, reach maturity in 2-3 years, and have been known to live up to 30 years.

Diet: Cormorants mainly seek out fish as prey. They have long thin hooked beaks that they can quickly maneuver underwater to catch their prey. In Shark Bay we frequently see cormorants surface with leatherjackets – a slow-moving fish found over seagrass beds. Usually pied cormorants forage alone – probably to avoid having their fish stolen by other cormorants. Pelicans also will steal fish from cormorants. Sometimes, however they form large rafts of dozens of cormorants (and sometimes pelicans) feeding on dense schools of small fish.

SBERP Research: SBERP's studies of pied cormorants focus on how they select habitats based on the availability of their fish prey and the risk of tiger shark predation. We have found that when sharks are not present, cormorants are distributed across habitats in proportion to the amount of food in them. They also like to forage over seagrasses rather than shallow sand patches. When sharks are present in the bay, cormorants spend less time in the shallow waters where more of their prey is found, and especially avoid the edges of banks, in order to reduce their chances of running into a tiger shark. We also are investigating whether cormorants change their diving behavior in response to the risk from tiger sharks. This work is ongoing so be sure to check out www.SBERP.org for the latest results.

