

Great Cormorant

8 Sep 1996

Rice L., Worth Co., IA

\*A. Johnson, \*Bangma

IBL 67:19, 82

Record Number: 96-44

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATIONS

Ann Johnson, 532 129th Ave., Norwalk 50211

Jim Bangma

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:19

Records Committee: IBL 67:82

VOTE: 1 A-D, 6 NA

NA, Details except for bill color and gular pouch color are all related to size. Size is always an important separating character, but because other supporting evidence is limited and size is easy to misread, especially during a brief observation I am voting NA on this record.

NA, Although both observers are familiar with the species, and size and shape are clearly suggestive of Great Cormorant, I am hesitant to establish a first state record based on such a brief view.

NA, This may have been a Great Cormorant, but observers seem somewhat unsure of identification with limited time of viewing. Adult or subadult should show white on face and juvenile should show light underparts. There is no vagrancy pattern to the Midwest, but hurricanes responsible for pelagic birds of Atlantic inland this summer.

NA, As much as I truly believe that this was a Great Cormorant, the level of evidence is not sufficient for acceptance. If only there had been a closer view of the gular pouch.... Tantalizing thought though, eh?

NA, There is no precedent for this species anywhere near Iowa and the date would be very early for a migrant. Size and coloration of cormorants vary, and interpretation of field marks is somewhat subjective, especially with dull light.

NA, Intriguing, but brief viewing time not conducive to careful ID of unprecedented occurrence. Both Great and DC very variable in size (25%) and almost completely overlap in size range. Photos in Harrison (Photo Guide Seabirds) do not support Bangma re forehead slope and neck/head transition.

**DOCUMENTATION FORM  
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

**Species:** Great Cormorant

**Location:** Rice Lake, Worth County, Iowa

**Habitat:** Open lake

**Date:** 8 September 1996 **Time:** 11:15 am **Length of observation:** Approximately two minutes

**Name and Address:** Ann Johnson, 532 120<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

**Other Observers:** Jim Bangma, Cliffside Park, NJ; also a number of people were on this field trip but no one else seemed to get on the bird

**Background:** While driving into the Rice Lake area on the IOU field trip, Jim and I had been discussing Neotropical Cormorants and how most people don't really look at a flock of cormorants. We pulled into the parking area and there was a flock of cormorants sitting in front of us on a sandbar. Jim got out of the car before I did and started scanning the flock. As I got out, he was heading back to the car saying, "AJ, get on the right most bird. I'm getting the scope."

After our sighting of this bird, we struggled with even reporting it because we had not even been able to get a scope on it. Because there are no midwest records, our initial thought was to forget about it. As several weeks have gone by, however, we are both still convinced of our sighting and have decided to submit the report so that it will be on file.

**Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics):** The day was overcast with intermittent drizzle. There was no precipitation at this particular moment. The bird was observed at approximately 100 yards through 7X42 Zeiss binoculars.

**Description of bird:** Because of our earlier discussion, Bangma's interest in a particular bird had me thinking that there may be a smaller cormorant out there, but this bird was huge. There was no color discernible anywhere on the body - it was all black, bill and all. The gular pouch was maybe a bit lighter, but it was not the orange of a Double-crested. All of the cormorants were lined up on the sandbar in approximately the same position with head and neck erect. This individual stood perhaps a head taller than the others. The neck was very thick and blended into the head, somewhat reminiscent of the difference between cormorants and loons.

I did not get any more detail on the bird before the flock inexpicably took flight. I hollered at Jim and we watched the birds fly over the lake and out of sight. During the entire time they were in the air, this individual was very easy to pick out because of its size. Because most of the group had moved down the road a bit, to our knowledge no one else actually observed this bird. We did tell Curt Nelson about it, however, so that he could keep his eyes open if he returned to the area later in the week. Because of time limitations and meeting responsibilities, we were unable to explore the lake further in search of the bird.

**Similar species/discussion:** No other cormorant stands a head taller than a Double-crested and size alone eliminates other North American cormorants. After the bird had disappeared, and before even looking at a field guide, we discussed how a bird that had just swallowed a fish might appear. Our feeling was that the neck might have a bulge if there was food in it, but it would not show the uniform thickness in this bird as it blended into the head. The thick neck and nearly uniform dark color add evidence to the identification as Great Cormorant.

**Previous experience:** I have seen several Great Cormorants on the East Coast and feel fairly confident there to pick them out by size and jizz when they are in a mixed flock. Bangma sees mixed flocks with regularity.

**References consulted:** National Geo guide and Harrison's "Seabirds"



96-44

**DOCUMENTATION FORM  
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

**Species:** Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*

**Location:** Rice Lake

**Habitat:** Lake

**Date:** Sept. 8, 1996 **Time:** 11:00AM **Length of observation:** 2 minutes

**Name and Address:** Jim Bangma

**Other Observers:** Ann Johnson

**Background:** While on the IOC birding caravan we pulled into the a parking area at Rice Lake. Approximately 100 yards offshore was a flock of cormorants sitting on a sand bar. The rightmost bird immediately attracted my attention due to its size. After viewing it, I pointed the bird out to Ann Johnson and began to set up a scope. The flock flushed before scope observations were possible.

**Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics):** Light overcast, approx 100 yards. Observations made with 7x42 Zeiss binoculars

**Description of bird:** The bird, was a large, completely black cormorant. The flock was standing with their necks erect. This bird stood out immediately as it was at least a full head taller than any of the others. On closer observation, the neck was noticeably heavier than any of the Double-crested Cormorants, blending evenly into the head. The forehead seemed rather abrupt. The bill was actually and relatively significantly longer and heavier than those of the other cormorants. It also appeared to have a stronger hook. The bill appeared all dark in contrast to the bills of the Double-cresteds present.

The gular pouch lacked the bright orange tones of a Double-crested, appearing paler. The flock flushed before detailed scope observations could be made of the exact color. The facial skin appeared dark.

When the flock flew off, this bird was immediately recognizable as substantially larger than any of the others in the flock. It appeared all black, with a much heavier neck and longer bill.

**Similar species/discussion:** Double-crested is smaller, with a much thinner neck. There is a noticeable transition from the thin neck to the larger head. In this bird, there was no noticeable widening from the neck to the head. Additionally, Double-crested has a proportionally much smaller and weaker bill. Double-crested's forehead slopes more evenly into the bill. While these differences may be difficult to see in single birds without comparative experience, in direct comparison they are significant. Additionally, the orange facial skin combines with the gular pouch to accentuate the overall orange color of the face

Other extralimital black cormorants can be ruled out on size alone, additionally, most have thinner necks and smaller bills than even Double-crested.

We did not observe white flank patches as the bird flew off. This is not inconsistent with Great Cormorant at this time of year. Breeding adults may have already lost the white flank patches by September. A number of them, probably in their second year, do not show the flank patches, even in spring. Additionally, a second year bird would have reduced white in the facial area. In addition to Bangma's personal experience with this species, the all black appearance of Great Cormorant at this time of year was confirmed by Start Tingley in personal conversation.

We considered the possibility that the bird had fish in its gullet. While this would give the appearance of a bulge in the throat, it would not give the uniform overall bull-necked appearance of this bird.

**Previous experience:** Each observer has over 30 years birding experience and is familiar with all North American cormorants. Additionally, Bangma has observed mixed flocks of Great and Double-crested Cormorants on a near daily basis for six or seven months the last six years.

**Note:** I have a reasonable amount of experience with mixed flocks of Double-crested and Great Cormorants. When I first saw this bird, my immediate reaction was "Great Cormorant." After discussion with Johnson and realization of the lack of mid-western records, we decided the sighting was best "forgotten." I did make brief notes and research the question farther on my return to NJ. In October, when I began again observing mixed cormorant groups and realized how distinctive the neck, head and bill differences are, I felt that this record should be submitted.

**References consulted:**

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