

# Ohio working to keep number of Cormorants under control

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BY KRISTINA SMITH HORN • WATCHDOG/ENTERPRISE REPORTER • NOVEMBER 25, 2010

CARROLL TOWNSHIP -- Less than 40 years ago, double-crested cormorants had nearly been wiped out of the Great Lakes.

The large black water birds were victims of the pesticide DDT, which also contributed to the decline of the bald eagle.

"I can remember the first cormorant I saw because it was so unusual," said Peter Butchko, who lived in Lakeside as a child and is now the wildlife services director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Michigan. "People were so excited to see their first cormorant."

That thrill has long worn off.

Today, cormorants nest on the Great Lakes, including the islands in Lake Erie's Western Basin near Port Clinton, in ever-growing numbers. DDT was banned, and southern catfish ponds increased, providing the birds with ample food to survive and grow during the winter months before returning to the Great Lakes in the spring.

"It's a stunning change," Butchko said.

The birds' populations are so massive in some areas that biologists say they are harming ecosystems and pushing other animals and plants out. This has prompted Ohio and Ontario to send sharpshooters to thin out the populations on Lake Erie. Other states, like Michigan, also have programs to kill the birds or oil eggs in their nests, which suffocates the chick in the egg and keeps it from hatching.

In Ontario and parts of Michigan, the shooting has been a source of controversy. An animal rights group in Canada strongly protested Parks Canada's plan for reducing numbers on Middle Island -- just across the Canadian border from the U.S. Lake Erie Islands -- and in Michigan, some residents want to see more birds taken.

Locally, however, agencies have been shooting the birds every spring for five years without attracting much attention.

Those agencies -- USDA Wildlife Services, Ohio Department of Natural Resources and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in Benton Township -- feel the efforts have been a success and could be scaled back soon, said Dave Sherman, wildlife biologist at ODNR's Crane Creek Wildlife Research Station.

"We started our management before it became a huge problem," Sherman said. "We've tried to get ahead of it."

### LOCAL CORMORANT SHOOTING

In the Western Basin, U.S. wildlife agencies shoot birds on three islands: Green Island, owned by the state of Ohio; West Sister Island, which is part of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in Benton Township; and Turning Point Island, a manmade island near the Sandusky coal dock.

They do not oil eggs because the cormorants on Lake Erie nest in trees, and oiling is only feasible in areas where the birds are ground nesters, Butchko said.

"We don't want to wipe them out," Sherman said. "They do have their place on Lake Erie. We just thought they were killing



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A cormorant and gull rest on the Cedar P  
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A double-crested cormorant flies past a s  
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**NUMBER OF CORMORANT NESTS  
IN 2010:**

**NUMBER OF CORMORANT NESTS  
IN 2009:**

- Green -- 325
- West Sister -- 2,433\*
- Turning Point -- 619
- Middle Island -- figures not yet avail
- Green -- 430
- West Sister -- 1,860
- Turning Point -- 950
- Middle Island -- 3,800

too much of the vegetation."

Locally, biologists' goal is to bring back the vegetation that the cormorants have destroyed with their acidic -- and abundant -- droppings, Sherman said. That vegetation provides habitat for other water birds, like great blue herons and black-crowned night herons, and for migratory birds, he said.

"It's our responsibility to ensure that other wetlands birds have places to nest," he said. "The vast majority (of people) doesn't want to see the islands turn into bare rocks."

Thanks to the shooting, it doesn't appear the islands are close to becoming barren, Sherman said. This year, shooters killed more than 2,000 birds and saw a reduction in the number of nests on Green and Turning Point islands, he said.

"The islands are looking a lot greener throughout the summer," he said. "You can tell a difference from pictures."

Biologists plan to take surveys of the vegetation to determine whether it has become healthier since shooting started, he said.

Although anglers aren't fond of the cormorants, whose diet consists of fish, no studies have been done on Lake Erie to determine whether they have an impact on sport fish populations, Sherman said.

A study of the cormorants' diet on northern Lake Michigan near Beaver Island showed the birds surveyed mainly ate invasive fish and found that round gobies were 33 percent of that diet in 2008, said Nancy Seefelt, Central Michigan University assistant professor of biology. In Michigan, cormorant control focuses on fish populations, as well as vegetation.

"Cormorants are very opportunistic," Seefelt said. "They'll eat anything that fits in their gullet in front of them."

## **THE CANADIAN SIDE**

East of Green Island is the Canadian Middle Island, a desolate rock filled with dead trees and flocks of cormorants.

The island, owned by Point Pelee National Park since 2000, is meant to be a bird sanctuary. In 2008, it was mainly a sanctuary for the cormorants. Some herons and gulls nested there, and other varieties of birds stopped by during migration.

Parks Canada began shooting cormorants -- despite heavy opposition from animal-rights group Cormorant Defenders International -- in spring 2008 and has been doing so every year since then.

"Middle Island is a dying island," said Marian Stranak, Point Pelee National Park superintendent. "The population of double-crested cormorants is just too high for that ecosystem to sustain itself."

The park has a five-year plan to reduce the number of cormorants, which it will evaluate after the fifth year to determine success and plans for the future, Stranak said. Like the U.S. Lake Erie Islands, the goal at Middle Island is to help vegetation rebound, she said.

"It's encouraging," Stranak said of the results so far. "When we do get the nest numbers down, the island can recover."

Parks Canada's wants to reduce the nests on the island to between 600 and 1,100, she said. In 2009, there were about 3,800

nests there, she said.

Like the United States, Canada wants to keep some cormorants, but it also wants to allow other species, especially threatened plants and animals, to live on the island or use it as a stopover during migration. Those threatened or endangered species include the red mulberry tree, the Kentucky coffee tree, the Lake Erie water snake and the monarch butterfly, she said.

"Vegetation is extremely important to Monarchs because it's a resting and feeding stop (during migration)," Stranak said.

Parks Canada also continues to monitor the tree canopy on the island and has taken soil samples to see if and how the island is recovering, she said.

"It will also help us build the framework for any restoration on the island after we have the nest numbers down where they need to be," she said.

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