



WILDLIFE NOTES

Neotropic cormorant

Phalacrocorax brasilianus

Flying a little ungainly, then dropping to the water where it expertly catches a fish for breakfast, the Neotropic cormorant might seem more at home on the ocean than a high desert.

In New Mexico this bird lives in the Rio Grande Valley (Elephant Butte Lake, Caballo Lake) and is seen regularly at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

Since the last revision of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish handbook of Species Endangered in New Mexico, the American Ornithologists' Union has changed the name of this Cormorant. The bird was previously the Olivaceous cormorant (*Phalacrocorax olivaceus*.)

These are fairly large dark waterbirds with long necks, hooked beaks, and short legs. In breeding plumage, the indented throat pouch is bordered with white. The length of this bird is about two feet with a wingspan of about three feet.

Descriptive Details

This bird has webbed feet and a stiff feathered tail. Adults are black, glossed with green or violet, and have scattered white feathers on the head and neck during breeding. The eyes are green, and the bill and feet are black. The bare skin of the face and throat is pale orange or yellow.

Distribution

This cormorant is found from southern New Mexico to southern Louisiana. Southward through Central America and the Caribbean to South America. Neotropic cormorants also may wander northward to the Bernalillo area and westward to the Gila Valley. This bird is rare in southern Hidalgo County, the area near Alamogordo, and in the lower Pecos Valley from Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge southward.

Biology

Cormorants are usually found on large bodies of water where they prey on fish. They swim and dive, drying their

wings in spread-eagle posture. Cormorants fly level, forming Vs or lines when in flocks. They nest near or over water, in vegetation such as dead snags or trees. The nests are made of sticks and host two to four greenish-white eggs, about 2 1/4 by 1 1/2 inches in size. The young hatch without feathers but soon grow a covering of dark down. These birds are often quite noisy, issuing croaks, grunts, brays, and whines.

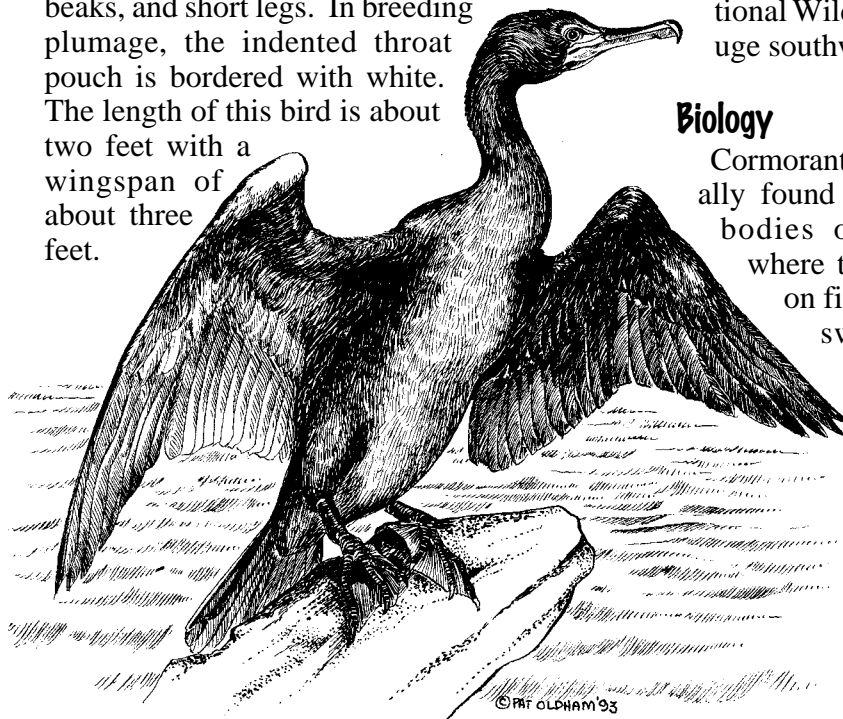
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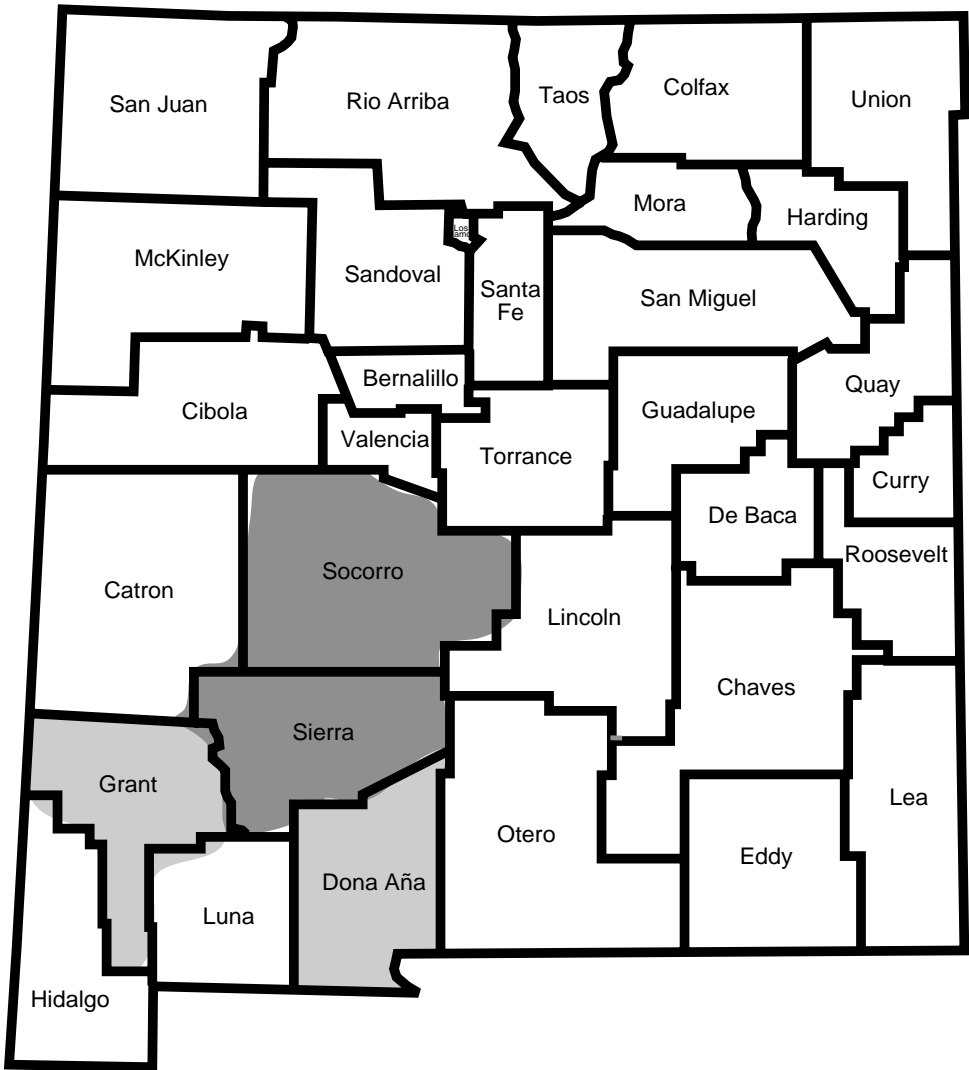
This is an adaptable bird, judging from its wide range. In New Mexico it has been a resident since 1972, but maximum numbers rarely exceed a few hundred birds. Nest counts in the Elephant Butte-Caballo lakes area have fluctuated from seven in 1975 to one in 1979, and none in 1985 to 50 in 1986. These generally low numbers, plus limited availability of nesting sites, persecution as fish-eaters, and irregular availability of food threaten this bird's status in New Mexico.

Conservation

Preserving and enhancing the cormorant's habitat is needed for breeding populations; in particular this would apply to the stands of trees and shrubs in or near the water. Breeding sites need to be protected from human disturbance and fluctuations in water levels. Illegal taking of birds should be prevented or eliminated.

Published 1993





Less Regular Occurrence
 Regular Occurrence

**Wildlife Notes is published by
 the Department of Game and Fish.
 If you are interested in obtaining
 additional copies, please send
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 Conservation Education Section
 Department of Game and Fish
 PO Box 25112
 Santa Fe, NM 87504
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