

The Facts about cormorant control in Ontario



Cormorant populations in Ontario have grown well above their historic numbers thanks to human caused introduction of alewife and round goby into the Great Lakes. Cormorants have been shown to reduce biodiversity where they colonize and can lead to local fisheries concerns. Because of this the OFAH has been pushing the Ontario government to manage overabundant cormorant populations.

Why are cormorants protected under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act?

Section 5(1) of the FWCA states “a person shall not hunt or trap specially protected wildlife or any bird that belongs to a species that is wild by nature and is not a game bird”. Previously, there was no special protection for cormorants; they just happen to fall under a general restriction. Under the new legislation, cormorants are classified as a game species and as such can only be hunted by licensed hunters under specific conditions.

Will cormorant control destroy entire colonies or exterminate cormorants in Ontario?

No. Many U.S. states have used intensive programs to effectively control cormorants without risk of extermination. Furthermore, existing restrictions on the discharge of firearms means that regulated hunting can't be the only method of cormorant control. Effective management requires a suite of complementary tools.

Should the explosion of cormorants in Ontario be celebrated as an environmental success?

No. Cormorant populations declined between the 1950s and early 1970s, largely due to contaminant (e.g. DDT) levels. It has been suggested that high cormorant abundance indicates environmental improvement, but the explosion of populations in Ontario was only partially due to a reduction in environmental contaminants. Other factors have contributed to range expansion and exponential population growth. Invasive fish, like Alewife, spread throughout the Great Lakes and provided an ideal forage base to support larger cormorant colonies than were present historically (or otherwise possible).

Are cormorants native to Ontario?

Ontario's first record of cormorants was in Lake of the Woods in 1798. In 1913 the first nesting birds were seen in Lake Superior and cormorants then began an eastward expansion to colonize all Canadian waters of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence by 1945.

Are cormorant populations under control in Ontario?

No. They continue to expand their range, reaching many inland lakes and rivers throughout Ontario. Some Great Lakes colonies are stable, but at overabundant levels that cause significant ecological harm. The relative stability is likely a result of U.S. efforts to control colonies in shared waters and along migratory routes. There have also been changes limiting cormorant population growth for some colonies because they have destroyed many of their own nesting habitats, and there have been changes in prey fish abundance.

Why don't we just let nature take care of itself?

We can't assume doing so will result in natural ecosystems returning to the way they were. Development, contaminants, invasive species and other human actions have altered our natural ecosystems. To help balance our ecosystems, human intervention is sometimes required. Cormorant control is one way we can successfully achieve this.

How much fish do cormorants eat?

Adult cormorants eat about one pound of fish per day. In Ontario, they commonly eat species like Alewife, Yellow Perch, Smallmouth Bass and Round Goby. Their diet is highly dependent on the location and time of year.

Do cormorant colonies help keep invasive species in check?

Cormorants feed on invasive fish like Round Goby; however, there is no research showing that cormorants offer significant control for the species. Even though invasive fish may be common in cormorant diets, concentrated foraging on specific age-classes of native fish can have negative effects on survival and recruitment. There are many aquatic ecosystems in Ontario with no invasive prey where native species make up their entire diet.

Why should Ontario choose fish and/or fisheries over cormorants?

Cormorant control is not about choosing one species over another. The Ontario Government, through the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) has a responsibility to manage the province's natural resources. When one component of an ecosystem becomes overabundant and threatens ecological integrity and biodiversity, the MNRF has a responsibility to restore balance. Overabundant cormorant populations have significant impacts on both aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems.



How do cormorants impact terrestrial ecosystems?

Research shows cormorant guano (excrement) and nest-building behaviours cause chemical and physical damage to soil and vegetation of terrestrial ecosystems. In addition to the loss of habitat for many species, cormorants outcompete other colonial nesting birds by competition for nesting sites and nest takeovers. The disturbance to the ecosystem left after cormorant colonies leave an area provides prime opportunities for invasive plants to move in.

Do cormorant colonies attract and protect other colonial nesting birds?

No. Cormorants are responsible for population declines of other colonial birds such as the black-crowned night heron, great blue heron and great egret in Presqu'île Provincial Park from 2011 to 2015. This includes the loss of the only great blue heron colony on Lake Ontario, and a 56-percent decline in great egret nests in Lake Ontario mainly due to a decline in the Presqu'île colony.

What are federal and provincial governments doing to control cormorants?

The provincial and federal governments have authority to control cormorant populations. The federal government has a successful program in Point Pelee National Park. Ontario has in the past, but is not currently using their authority to actively control cormorants on provincial lands where many of the largest colonies are found. They are only carrying out ineffective non-lethal control programs (e.g. Presqu'île).

Is lethal cormorant control effective?

Ontario Parks controlled cormorants in Presqu'île Provincial Park from 2004 to 2006 using egg oiling, culling and nest removal. This program reduced tree nests and ground nests by 68-percent and 69-percent respectively, relative to pre-management levels. This helped to restore vegetation and habitat for other species.

Are non-lethal forms of cormorant control effective in Ontario?

Using only non-lethal control measures in Presqu'île Provincial Park (during the period of 2011 to 2015) resulted in a 41-percent increase in the cormorant population.

Why did Ontario Parks stop lethal cormorant control in Presqu'île Provincial Park?

Through a loophole in environmental assessment legislation, the Minister of Environment (NOT the MNRF), ordered Ontario Parks to only use lethal measures as a last resort. Since 2007, there has only been monitoring and the non-lethal control measures.

Does lethal cormorant control have a negative impact on other colonial nesting birds?

There is no evidence to support this. In fact, lethal cormorant actions are more targeted than non-lethal measures, such as those now used in Presqu'île (e.g. nest removal, roost disturbance and construction of artificial nests). Disturbance can negatively affect all nesting birds and man-made nesting structures can inflate cormorant populations.

Do private property owners have the right to kill cormorants in protection of their property?

Property owners can get authorization from MNRF to harm or kill cormorants under the Protection of Property provisions of the FWCA; however, many cormorant colonies in Ontario are found on public lands.

Has the United States made cormorant control illegal?

No. The U.S. District Court ruled that the Public Resource Depredation Order (permits cormorant control by States) was issued illegally based on procedural issues and not the merits of cormorant control as a management tool.