

# Cormorants

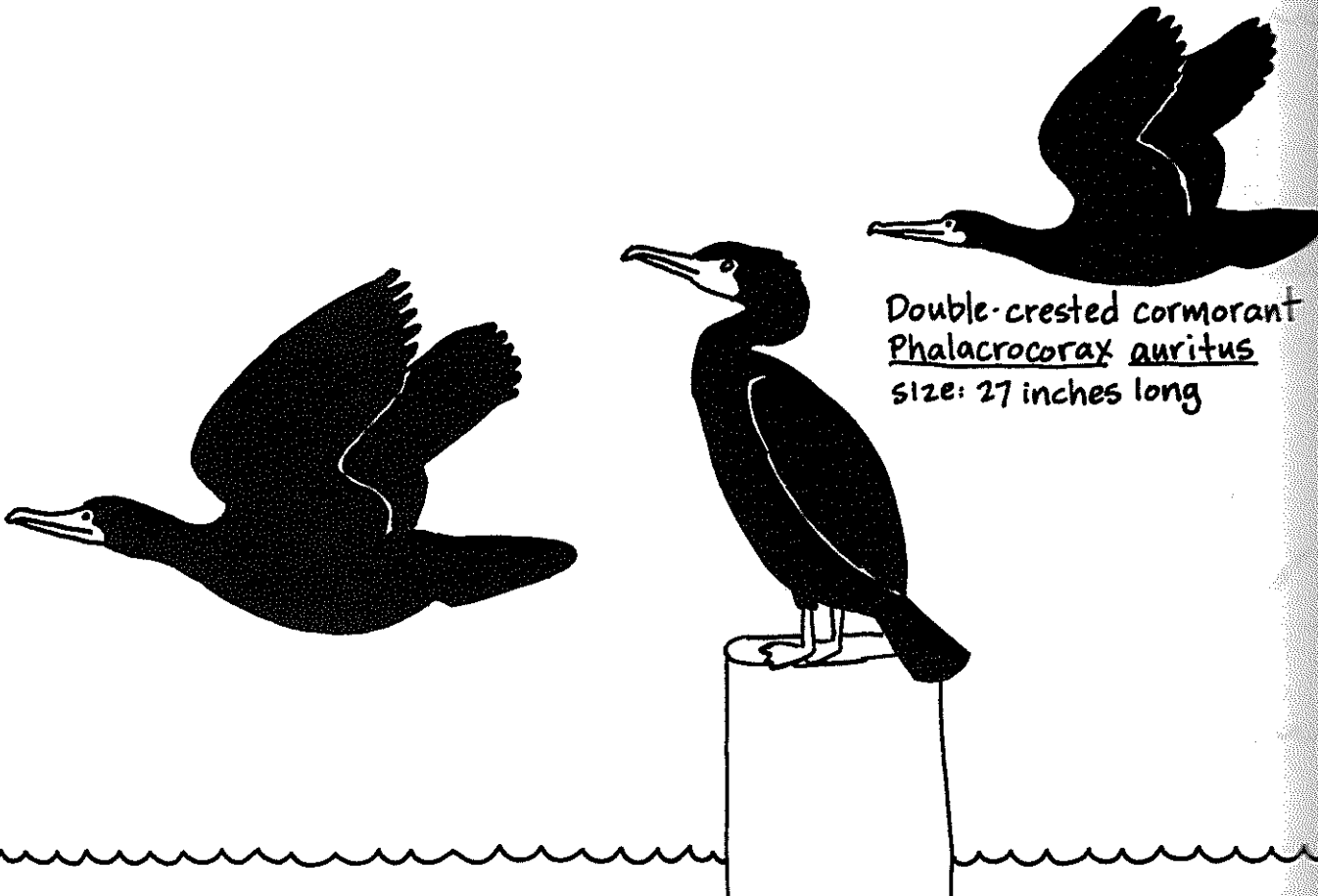
Watching cormorants can provide hours of entertainment and education. The species most likely to be seen from Maine to Florida is the Double-crested cormorant, *Phalacrocorax auritus*, a black goose-like bird with an orange throat pouch and a barely noticeable double crest on its head. In the winter, the Double-crested cormorant heads south (but stays as far north as Long Island), and the Great cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*, comes down from Canada into New England. The Great cormorant is larger and has a white patch under its throat.

Cormorants fly with their necks outstretched, and occasionally glide when flying. Their takeoff from the water is less than graceful. Usually they hit the water with their wings several times before gaining any altitude. While swimming, cormorants tilt their bill upward in a dignified manner.

Cormorants eat fish. To capture their prey, cormorants dive underwater from a swimming position, not from the air. Using their webbed feet (and occasionally their wings) for

propulsion and their tail as a rudder, cormorants swim underwater and nab fish. Cormorants have very flexible throats, and by tilting their head up they can swallow surprisingly large fish. Their bones are rather heavy; this helps the bird submerge. When cormorants emerge from the water after eating, they perch upright and extend their wings to dry. Their plumage is not waterproof.

Cormorants produce an incredible amount of guano. They rapidly convert their fish dinners into nutrient-rich (nitrogen and phosphorus) droppings. Waters around nesting colonies of cormorants have luxuriant algal growth that feeds large populations of fish and invertebrates. Along the northeast coast, Double-crested cormorants nest on cliffs or rocky islands, often near nests of gulls and eiders. In the south, this cormorant nests in trees near the water, adjacent to nesting herons and pelicans. One tree may contain over thirty cormorant nests.



Double-crested cormorant  
*Phalacrocorax auritus*  
size: 27 inches long