

BRANDT'S CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*

Conservation Status

Alaska: None

N. AMERICAN: High Risk

GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
June-Aug	3-6	~ 30 d	~ 35 d	ground, cliff ledge	surface dive	fish, squid, other invertebrates

Life History and Distribution

The name *penicillatus* is Latin for a painter's brush (pencil of hairs), in reference to white plumes found on the head, neck, and back of the Brandt's Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*) during the early breeding season. The common name honors the Russian naturalist Johann Friedrich von Brandt who described the species from specimens collected on expeditions to the Pacific during the early 1800's.

It is a solidly built cormorant with a thick neck, large head, and solid brownish-black plumage with a green luster. Breeding birds have a purple luster on the head and neck and a bright cobalt-blue throat pouch bordered with yellow. No other species of cormorant has a blue gular region with a yellowish border. Young birds are duller and buff colored on the breast. Birds of all ages and phases have light-colored cheek patches. Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) are similar, but fly with more of a crook in the neck and have a conspicuous orange throat pouch. The Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) is smaller and more slender, with a smaller head; the adult has white flank patches.

Brandt's Cormorant is endemic to marine and brackish environments along the west coast of North America. It breeds from Southeast Alaska to Mexico with the highest concentrations closely tied to the California Current System. Along the Pacific Coast of North America, it occurs regularly from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, south to Island Margarita on the Pacific Coast of Baja California and Island San Pedro Mártir in the Gulf of California.

In Alaska, the species is found extra-liminally and is a very local, intermittent breeder. Records include nests on Seal Rocks in Prince William Sound, and Hazy and St. Lazaria islands in Southeast Alaska.

Generally, Brandt's Cormorants nest in colonies on rocky islets. Nests are built on the ground on flat or sloping areas or on cliffs with flat ledges. The nest is large and disorderly and made of plants or seaweed.

This species is gregarious year-round. They often gather in flocks of several hundred and fly to feeding grounds in long straggling lines. Foraging areas are generally within fifteen miles of their island or mainland colonies. Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants frequently nest on the same cliffs, with Brandt's forming colonies on the



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level ground at the top of the cliff and the Pelagic choosing inaccessible ledges.

There is an extensive, regular postbreeding redistribution, but the winter range is much the same as the breeding range. Movements are apparently directed by shifts in food availability. The winter range extends north to Prince William Sound, south to the tip of Baja California, and throughout much of the Gulf of California.

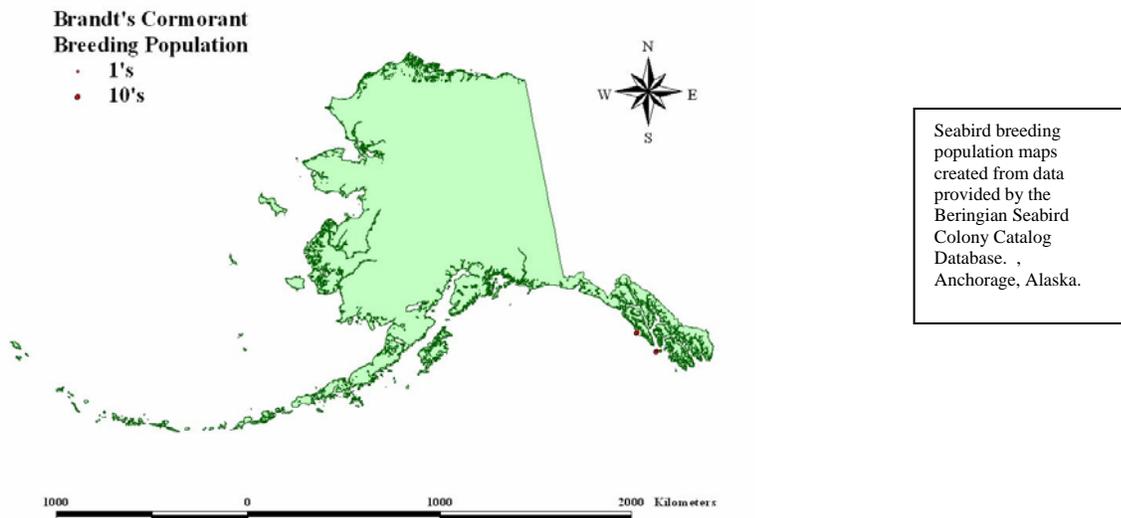
Alaska Seasonal Distribution

AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern *	+	R	+	+
Southcoastal *	-	R	-	-
Southwestern	-	-	-	-
Central	-	-	-	-
Western	-	-	-	-
Northern	-	-	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.

Population Estimates and Trends

The most recent surveys indicate a total breeding population of < 100,000 individuals, with approximately



75% breeding in California and Oregon. A complete census of breeding colonies in California, Oregon, and Washington was conducted in 2001-2003 and approximately 37,000 nests were counted (USFWS unpubl. data). This represents 10% and 25% declines compared to censuses conducted during 1975-1981 and 1989-1991, respectively. There has also been a regional shift in abundance from the Farallon Islands in California to colonies along the central Californian coast and the Channel Islands. Individual colony size and productivity vary interannually in response to changing oceanographic conditions such as the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO).

The first breeding colony in Alaska was at Seal Rocks in Prince William Sound. The area was made habitable by uplift resulting from the 1964 earthquake. Four nests were occupied at least until 1978, but are now abandoned. St. Lazaria Island in Southeast Alaska had 20 nests in 1984, but has been abandoned since 1994 or possibly before (USFWS unpubl. data). The only known colony remaining in Alaska is on Hazy Island in Southeast Alaska where 40 nests were counted in 2000 (USFWS unpubl. data). Only 23 nests were counted on Hazy Island in 1982.

Since colonies vary from year to year in size and location, interpretation of numbers is difficult.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

Today, although common, Brandt's Cormorants remain at risk from disturbance at nesting and roosting sites, pollutants, commercial fisheries, and from the recreational use of the West Coast marine environment.

The most serious conservation concern for Brandt's cormorants is human disturbance at dense breeding colonies. Brandt's Cormorants are especially vulnerable to disturbance during incubation. The adults flush from the nest when approached by humans, boats, low-flying aircraft, and dogs, resulting in increased predation by gulls and ravens and nest abandonment. Repeated disturbance can cause permanent desertion of the colony.

Mortality from coastal gillnet fisheries has been recorded from California and Baja California. Since other species of cormorants are taken in gillnets in Alaska, it is possible that the Brandt's Cormorant is at risk for incidental take where they overlap with gillnet fisheries.

Brandt's Cormorants are also killed as a result of oil contamination though the impacts of these events on populations are not well-studied.

Recommended Management Actions

- Continue to monitor the colony on Hazy Island in Southeast Alaska.
- Protect breeding colonies and roosting sites from human disturbance.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2005, 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Internet Website (2005); Wallace and Wallace 1998.

Full credit for the information in this document is given to the above references.