

Great Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

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Hunter Bird
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A Great Cormorant in breeding plumage – note the white thigh patch, small dark erectile crest and short white nuptial plumes on its neck (photo: Steve Merrett)

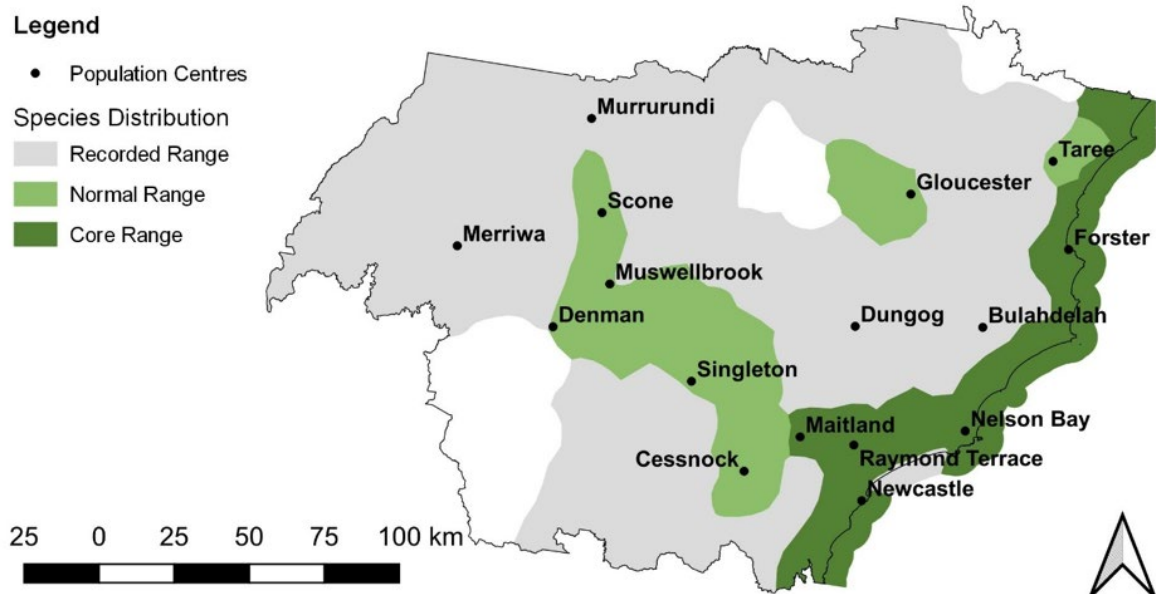
This is a large dark cormorant with diagnostic white cheek and throat, and yellow bare facial skin. In breeding plumage, the white area on the face becomes more distinct and the bird also develops a white patch on the outside of its thighs, and small white nuptial plumes on its neck. It also develops a short erectile crest. Adult males and females are almost identical (males are slightly larger). Juvenile birds are browner and have mottled underparts, and little or no white on their face. Potentially a juvenile Great Cormorant might be confused with a Little Black Cormorant but the latter are considerably smaller and never have any whiteish underparts.

Great Cormorant pairs are monogamous and they may return to the same nest site year after year if they were successful in breeding at that site before.

They nest in large colonies, often with other species, including other cormorants, gulls, and egrets. Chicks leave the nest at about 4 weeks and fledge at about 7 weeks, but are fed by their parents until about 11 weeks when they disperse. There is very little information about the moult sequence for juvenile birds. Breeding is thought to begin at around two years old.

Regional Status

The Great Cormorant has a wide distribution in the Hunter Region, occurring wherever there are substantial bodies of water (either fresh or saline). However, the stronghold is near-coastal habitat particularly estuaries. Most of the breeding records are from near-coastal areas too, including there are colonies breeding regularly at swamps around Shortland and Sandgate. Those colonies have far fewer pairs than they did 20-30 years ago.



Distribution map for Great Cormorant (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Range and sub-species

Great Cormorants are one of the most widespread of cormorant species, with a cosmopolitan distribution. They are found throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and in northeastern coastal North America. Many sub-species are recognised although only one of them occurs in Australia: *novaehollandiae* (the Australasian Great Cormorant). In some taxonomies, the sub-Saharan African *P. c. lucidus*, which has a white neck and breast, is treated as a full species, *Phalacrocorax lucidus* (White-breasted Cormorant)

A legal target

During the first three decades of the 20th Century, Great Cormorants were legally able to be shot by fishermen, who believed them to be a threat to their industry. However, there was hardly any dent seen in the local population, probably because of the birds' ability to move long distances, resulting in rapid replacement of slaughtered birds. And as they prefer to eat small fish, the fishermen's concerns largely were unjustified.



A Great Cormorant in non-breeding plumage (photo: Dawn Riggett)

About the name

Great Cormorant

The word “cormorant” is of French origin and derives from the Latin name for this species – *corvus marinus*, a “sea raven”. It is the largest of the five cormorant species found in Australia, and the largest in most of its wide range.

Phalacrocorax carbo

The species name *carbo* is the Latin word for charcoal. The genus name was bestowed in 1760 by Mathurin Jacques Brisson, a French zoologist, and derives from the Greek words *phalakros*, bald, and *korax*, raven. No-one can work out why he chose “bald” although originally that term meant “white”

especially in reference to animals' heads. Perhaps he was thinking of the white throat patch in breeding adults?



An immature Great Cormorant – it has indistinct white cheeks and throat (photo: Leslie Wilson)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2016). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 2

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