



Chorus sinensis Photo: Jan Erala

The Great Cormorant – a Bird Worthy of a Song

Karoliina Lummaa, Researcher of literature and environmental humanities Turku University

Everything that is important gets a story, a song of its very own. Nature and all its animals and plants are meaningful to us, and that meaning is reflected in art and culture. And what has been depicted and written about remains in our minds as something worth cherishing. Finnish author and veterinarian Yrjö Kokko wrote about the whooper swan and thereby inspired people see the value of the bird and protect it. Ferdinand von Wright's painted capercaillies settled into Finnish homes and minds for generations. Juha "Watt" Vainio wrote the albatross into our imaginaries of freedom, yet he also linked the bird to personal relationships: the albatross in his lyrics makes us think of a friend who has passed. And in their prehistoric sorrow songs, women sang about a "downcast duck".

Peruse Finnish poetry and you will find seagulls and crows a-plenty, songbirds, nocturnal and diurnal raptors, occasionally other birds as well. But songs about the great cormorant? Or cormorants in books or paintings, or music for that matter? Nowhere in Finnish high culture, pop culture, art or folklore can you find a story of the great cormorant that would give the bird significance and value as part of the lived environment and the landscape of the mind.

That is not to say that nothing has been written of the cormorant. It is a bird species that actually has a working group set up for it specifically. It is a bird that has warranted a national strategy and action plan for its management.

The number of cormorants and the location and size of their colonies are monitored in reports. Data is collected to assess the impact of the colonies on the environment, the economy and humans in the area. Monitoring and research data are then used to draw up recommendations and consider the need for, and possible means of, population control. (Cormorant Working Group 2016; Ministry of the Environment 2019.)

The reason for these nature management documents is the perceived nuisance and problems caused by cormorant colonies. The large black birds nest and live in large, dense colonies on islets and islands where the vegetation is transformed by their droppings. Green vegetation recedes, rocks and trees turn white and a pungent odour wafts on prevailing winds to nearby areas. Cormorant colonies affect the fisheries in their area, although the great cormorant mainly eats species not harvested for human consumption.

According to a report of the Cormorant Working Group appointed by the Ministry of Environment in 2015 (2016, 14), "data on the development and distribution of the cormorant population as well as on fisheries

are essential for the sustainable control of cormorant-human interaction". The cormorant has been the subject of a great deal of scientific research and wildlife management monitoring in recent years, and factual, strategy-based information about the bird have been made publicly available. Persecution of the great cormorant has not ceased, however, and the changes in the environment caused by the birds persist. Our relationship with nature goes far beyond mere knowledge and facts.

An expert on the cultural meanings associated with birds, ornithologist Jeremy Mynott distinguishes between two different ways of talking about birds, the scientific and the emotional: on one hand, there is common knowledge founded on experimental research; on the other hand, there are ideas and presentations based on beliefs, stories and personal experience. (Mynott 2009, 2-6.) As Mynott himself points out, however, the distinction is never quite that simple. Scientific concepts and strategies, as well as scientific resource management, are to some extent always influenced by culturally and emotionally determined ideas and valuations. (Mynott 207-228; 281-296.) In order to understand the conflicts revolving around the cormorant, in addition to research results and observable environmental impacts, we must examine the cultural meanings these birds possess - or do not possess.

Name and history

Some aspect of a bird is always inscribed in its name: what a bird sounds or looks like, where it lives and what it does can all be somehow indicated in its name. And because birds are named by humans, the names also reflect encounters between humans and birds, such as the places where such meetings commonly take place or the similarities humans perceive between themselves and the bird. (Hintikka 2008; Mynott 2009; Häkkinen 2011.)

The scientific name of the great cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*, includes both Greek and Latin elements: the Greek *phalakrós* means bald-headed and *kórax* is a raven. The Latin *carbo* means carbon. (Hintikka 2008, 53.) The name of the subspecies found in Finland, *sinensis*, means Chinese. The conflict between us and the great cormorant is thought to arise in part from the assumption that the species is alien in origin. The subspecies *Phalacrocorax carbon sinensis* is found widely throughout the world. It was named *sinensis* by George Staunton in 1796 after a specimen caught in China, although Staunton thought the bird a separate species entirely. His name for the great cormorant was *Pelecanus sinensis*. (Birdlife 2021.)

The Finnish name of the great cormorant, *merimetso* or "sea grouse", is often explained by the bird's resemblance to the wood grouse (e.g., Hintikka 2008, 53; Häkkinen 2011, 280, 304). The name originally appeared in written Finnish as *merimetzäs* (or *merimetsäs*), first in Antti Lizelius' revised translation of the *Bible* in 1758 and then in Erik Lencqvist's report on the parish of Taivassalo, published in 1793. In the

Bible, the great cormorant appears in a list of inedible or unclean birds, whereas an earlier translation based on Luther's German rendering had the names *joutsen* or *luikko*. According to Kaisa Häkkinen (2011, 104), an expert on the origins of Finnish bird names, the correction of the name is justified by the characterisation of the waterfowl in the original Hebrew as one that "throws itself at its prey". It must have been some species of cormorant.

The great cormorant's Finnish name may refer to the bird's black appearance, size and resemblance to the wood grouse, but it can also be a translation of the species' old Swedish name, *havstjäder* (*hav*, sea; *tjäder*, grouse). By contrast, the English name and the German *Kormoran* are both borrowed from the French *Grand Cormoran*, derived from the Latin name, *Corvus marinus*, sea raven. (Hintikka 2008, 53-54.) In other words, the great cormorant has been associated with both the wood grouse and raven in different language areas and at different times. Perhaps the grouse and the raven were more familiar and culturally or economically more significant birds - foundational birds of sorts, if you will - with which the great, black, songless bird of the sea was compared.

The *sinensis* subspecies that breeds today along coastal areas of Finland is estimated to have first spread to the Baltic Sea between the 16th and 18th centuries. The subspecies *carbo* had nested in the Baltic Sea even earlier, having possibly arrived about 10,000 years ago, soon after the last ice age. As a result of active persecution, *sinensis* disappeared from the Baltic Sea (and from much of Europe) at the turn of the 20th century. Scattered sightings of the great cormorant were made in Finland in 1996, and populations began to increase rapidly. (Below 2007.) In 2009 there were already 16,000 nesting couples. In recent years, the number of nesting cormorant couples has stabilised at around 26,000. At present great cormorant populations are kept in check by white-tailed eagles in particular. (SYKE 2021.) The white-tailed eagle, which was deemed endangered in Finland as late as the 1970s, is today listed in the Finnish Red Book of species as LC, or Least Concern - as is the great cormorant (Ministry of the Environment et al. 2019).

Animosity towards the great cormorant has been explained by the bird's sudden return and rapid proliferation. (SYKE 2021; Birdlife 2021.) It has even been referred to as an invasive species that threatens the original, fragile island nature. In Finland's *National Strategy on Invasive Alien Species* (2012), the great cormorant is classified as a species that has returned to its original habitat. The strategy says:

Archaeological bone findings date the history of the great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) in what is now the Baltic Sea area to just after the Ice Age. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, the great cormorant had been completely eradicated from the Baltic Sea, and it took 50 years for the species to return to this part of its distribution range. The species began a rapid natural spread into the Baltic Sea from the North Sea coast in the early 1980s and re-entered Finland in 1996. Rapid population growth was enabled by an abundance of fish suitable for food, e.g. common roach proliferating due to eutrophication in the outer archipelago. The great cormorant is not an

alien species and is therefore excluded from this strategy. (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2012, 39.)

In documents on the management of natural resources and their annexes, the great cormorant is discussed as a cause of conflict, dispute and controversy. There is no expectation that solutions might be found based on research data and stock management alone; it is essential that the parties to the conflict – especially individuals and communities complaining about cormorant damage – feel they are heard. (Hiedanpää 2016; Pohja-Mykrä 2016.) The rapid expansion of great cormorant populations and the changes they effect in the environment, even when negative, are a reality locals must adapt to. Cormorant conservation targets passed down from above are seen to be unfair and have incited resistance. Such disputes are about justice and the exercise of power and are always present in connection with resource management issues.

Disputes over the great cormorant have their cultural dimension too. In the course of a hundred years, the great cormorant was forgotten by Finns, and its return has led to an experiential shock of sorts.

Persecution

In spite of all the effort by officials, naturalists, bird researchers and enthusiasts, cormorants are still perceived as a problem. But it is not the only bird that arouses hatred. Jackdaws, barnacle geese and various gull species have increasingly been the subject of discussions zeroing in on nuisances and problems. The perception is that the populations of these species are too large. We talk of vermin, even of trash birds, Actually, but in actual fact we talk about life itself as a nuisance or trash – and that is something which needs to be cleaned up.

In the old *Bible* translation, the great cormorant is an unclean bird we must not eat. Just as in resource management speak, so in the *Bible* the cormorant is a bird associated with rules and regulations. Instead of an action plan or strategy, in the *Bible* the bird is the subject of religious prohibition that, at its core, is founded on social relations and social order: this bird is unclean in our community, therefore our community will not touch this bird. In the course of history, the inedibility of the great cormorant has developed into generalised ineligibility. The great cormorant eats too much, excretes too much, and does not belong in our environment.

The term “trash bird” is often used to refer to birds that live on waste, either in the vicinity of human settlement or near waste treatment plants. Such trashiness should in fact be tolerated, because waste, while being manageable, cannot ever be eliminated completely. Just like all other animals, “trash birds” make use of resources available in their environment. Gavan Watson (2013, 34), who has written about

perceptions of seagulls, comments on garbage and ring-billed gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) that are observed at landfill sites: “they eat it, they excrete it, they are it”. The great cormorant, by contrast, is not hated because it eats garbage but because it is assumed to eat something valuable. There is a certain sad irony in this: research shows that cormorants actually eat fish deemed trash by us – not fit for human consumption. Could it be that even if a consensus was to develop between scientists and fishermen on the great cormorant’s diet, the bird’s reputation would not be cleared?

Philosopher Randy Malamud (2013, ix-xiii) writes that, just as trash and other detritus of our material culture resist convenient categories, the trash animal too is unclassified: it is not a pet, it is not food, it possesses no charisma or beauty. And since its localisation within the categories is too much trouble, we throw it on the trash heap. The great cormorant is a case par excellence in this regard, because it lies supremely outside any useful or even recognisable categories. The great cormorant has no place or meaning in our cultural imaginary: it is not a national symbol, not a rare species, nor is it recognised in art or edible. This placelessness and absence of narrative makes the great cormorant a drifter, a surplus species. Moreover, as it causes observable changes in the environment that are generally perceived to be unpleasant, in our minds it easily slips into the category of trash and nuisance. Actual research data on the positive effects of the great cormorant on water bodies and fisheries (reducing eutrophication, catching fish considered unfit for humans) are overlooked when the only category that dominates people’s minds is trash.

In fact, trash animals are often the ones quickest to adapt to new habitats and change the environments they inhabit, disrupting existing ecosystems. (Nagy & Johnson 2013, 25; Mynott 2009, 221–222.) Great cormorants are like that but so are humans. The loathing aroused by a widely distributed, highly adaptable and somehow unclean (trash) species should logically extend to *Homo sapiens* as well, says gull researcher Gavan Watson. (Watson 2013, 36.) People rarely hate humanity as a species, however, but the categories of trash and filth are quite viable between hierarchies within groups of people. The talk about animals as trash and a nuisance stems from the anthropocentric classification and division of wildlife and life itself into what is beneficial and what is harmful to humans. This ties in with a more general view of humanity as external and superior to nature: humanity has the ability and the right to control non-human nature. Whenever a species is perceived to be a nuisance, the individuals of that species will be deemed controllable, manageable, even eliminable. (Nagy & Johnson 2013; Pohja-Mykrä 2016.)

Trash is associated with disposability. Just as things of no worth can be trashed, destroyed and disposed of, the same ruthless violence and cruelty can be inflicted on trash animals. (Kennedy 2007, xvi-xvii; cited in Nagy & Johnson 2013, 7.) The great cormorant too has become a target, with public presentations

made to eradicate the species. Dead birds are hung up on islands for all to see, and pictures and stories of great cormorants being killed are disseminated on social media. It is no longer a piece of worthless rubbish to be cleaned up; it is an enemy, the killing of which (along with the display of that act) is socially and politically significant. Shooting and hanging birds and destroying their nests are presented as a public virtue that has or is presented as having the support of local residents and fishermen. Publicised killings are a way to produce and maintain cohesion in the human community, and it also signals concern for the common good. The meaning of an image of a killed bird is not that a bird is dead but that a problem is under control.

Coexistence

“The great cormorant can hardly be called a beautiful bird,” says the caption of a photograph depicting a great cormorant in Olavi Hildén and Pentti Linkola’s *Suuri lintukirja* (1955, 580). At the time, the 1950s, great cormorants were transient birds in Finland. Instead of the bird’s feeding habits and related considerations or the environmental impacts of its colonies, Hildén and Linkola focus on describing the appearance and behaviour of the species. They describe its typical pose: “[w]hen resting, it stands very erect and intermittently fans its wings or holds them slightly outstretched in a characteristic way, probably to dry them”. (Hildén & Linkola 1955, 580.) The writers also discuss the difference between the sexes and the bird’s mating behaviour:

The female is said to be the more active party in courtship, pulling its head back, spreading its wings slightly and raising its tail diagonally upwards. As its excitement mounts, it closes its wings, raises its tail even higher and swings its head backwards repeatedly so that the top of its head touches its back. Occasionally it shakes its open beak and makes guttural noises. (Hildén & Linkola 1955, 580.)

Contemporary species guides discuss the great cormorant’s catches at greater length, and wing spreading is often mentioned in connection with its behaviour. Its call is usually left unmentioned. Indeed, the great cormorant is one of the bird species whose tongue is atrophied or completely lacking. (Nikander & Hohtola 2007, 186.) According to Hildén and Linkola (1955, 580), the bird’s call is a “rough *kra* or a deep *gorr*, neither particularly pleasant”. In British English, the great cormorant’s vocalising has been transcribed as *korr*. (Bevis 2010, 93.) The bird’s voice is also heard in its name. The great cormorant’s modern Swedish name, *storskarv*, can be traced back to the Proto Germanic *skarbh* (spelling based on reconstructions, no written sources), which is presumably onomatopoeic, a reference to the bird’s call. (Hintikka 2008, 53-54.) The Sámi name *skárfa* probably also comes from *skarbh*.

The great cormorant is not among the most mentioned and described species in identification guides and other bird literature. Because of its obvious yet controversial characterisation as a nuisance, it remains relatively obscure. Natural history research and resource management documentation can be used to

gauge the great cormorant's importance not only for humans but for other species as well. For example, cormorant monitoring has shown that great cormorant colonies provide protection for alcids nesting in colonies threatened by feral minks, such as the endangered common murre (*Uria aalge*). (SYKE 2021.) There are also many other species that live in close contact with the great cormorant, and these species and communities have their own rich histories, stretching far beyond human records. Without interspecific links, the great cormorant would not have been able to return.

Alongside species-specific knowledge and understanding, it might be useful to place the perceived conflicts with particular species, such as the great cormorant, into a larger frame. Although animals cause damage and harm, they are critical underdogs as species, populations and individuals. Climate change is advancing, biodiversity is dwindling and natural environments are becoming increasingly stressed, chemically speaking. Some species appear successful and others vulnerable depending on timescale and place, but our systemic understanding of the interconnections and interactions between different environmental impacts remains limited. (Barnosky & Hadly 2017.)

Whether between species, communities or individuals, conflicts are part of life. Each species uses all means of survival available to it, and those always have an impact on the environment. Species that end up being listed as a nuisance are in an exceptional position, in that no other species has as much power over their habitat as *Homo sapiens*. We are capable of destroying entire ecosystems, of driving species to extinction, even of disrupting the Earth System itself. Consequently, destruction does not apply merely to wilfully chosen individuals or populations – humanity also causes unintentional destruction on temporal and spatial scales that are difficult if not impossible to assess. The key is to realise the depleting effect this has on biodiversity and vitality: multispecies configurations and endless variability are replaced by something shaped exclusively by a single species that satisfies only its own purposes. (Puura 2013.)

In addition to interspecific connections, the relationship between humans and the great cormorant can be examined by considering different cultures. The best-known example of cormorant-human interaction is probably cormorant fishing in China and Japan, which first began more than 2,300 or even 2,600 years ago. Fishermen catch cormorants, attach snares or rings to their throats and strings to their legs, and make them dive for fish. The birds are unable to swallow large fish, although some of the smaller fish they catch are allowed to pass. A fleet of fishing boats may have had numerous birds, with people benefitting from the birds' skills. This partnership of questionable cruelty even elicited poetry about the cormorant in China and Japan. (Cocker 2013, 149-151.)

The relationship between humanity and the cormorant is formed through past and present customs and perceptions. The birds themselves contribute to these relationships and perceptions by their appearance, behaviour, abilities and interspecific relationships (Ratamäki 2009). Nevertheless, it is humans who constantly interpret, assess and evaluate the qualities of the great cormorant, sees them in a certain way, creates an image and a narrative.

Once Upon a Time

A big blackguard of a bird that depletes fisheries and with its droppings brings death to verdant places pleasing to the human eye - this is one possible way of describing the great cormorant. Black bird, white droppings; a black-and-white image of a bird. The black of the cormorant is a dirty, evil black, its skill in catching fish a form of catastrophic greed, its communal life polluting and destructive. That is what it looks like when you regard the bird and its nature from on high, scanning for signs of nuisance and disorder. Are other stories and images of the great cormorant possible? Is this bird worthy of a human song?

"Once upon a time," fairy tales begin. One of the most famous bird tales in science is biologist Rachel Carson's *A Fable for Tomorrow*, which begins her book *Silent Spring* (1962) about the environmental harm of DDT and other pesticides. In Carson's tale, an American city becomes bereft of birdsong when pesticides begin to make the birds sick and later humans too. Fables are powerful. Although the worldwide ban on DDT was due to scientifically demonstrated effects, due to its vividness and emotional appeal, Carson's fable is considered an important trigger for the debate on environmental toxins. (e.g., Waddell 2000.)

Can there be poems about a bird that never sings, about a bird that many people see as a nuisance? What will be the great cormorant's tale told in the future? Against the backdrop of biodiversity depletion, every species is worthy of a song.

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