

Cormorant Position Paper

- by the European Anglers Alliance (EAA) - November 2020

The European Parliament adopted a resolution in 2008, which urged the EU Commission “to promote the sustainable management of cormorant populations by means of increased scientific and administrative coordination, cooperation and communication, and to create appropriate conditions for the drafting of a Europe-wide cormorant population management plan.”¹

However, the request was not followed by the Commission. The request remains as relevant today as it was in 2008. In 2008 the European population of cormorants was estimated ca. 2 million. Today, the population is about the same size. The bird’s impact on threatened or protected fish species is a serious problem in many places. The quality of fishing is severely hampered in many inland and coastal locations, too. As the cormorant is highly migratory, cross-border cooperation, ideally a pan-European management plan, is required.

But the EU Commission’s position is:

“The Commission recognises the need for coordinated action to address the issue of cormorants. However, the Commission does not consider that an EU-wide management plan would be an appropriate measure for that, as it was clear from earlier debates, that there is no consensus between Member States on the type of action to take or on the need and value of managing cormorant populations at a pan-European scale. Article 9 of the Birds Directive lays down a derogation system that provides a tool to protect fisheries’ interests and, if used in a more coordinated manner, can contribute efficiently to reducing the impact of cormorants on fisheries and some aquatic ecosystems.”²

a) As the cormorant problem is not resolved or lessened in spite of the European Parliament’s request more than a decade ago, and

b) as the Birds Directive is not about protection only but also management and control of birds (Art 1), and to take into account economic and recreational requirements (Art 2), then the European Anglers Alliance (EAA) urges the following:

1) EAA urges strongly all EU Member States, which don’t make efficient enough use of the derogation possibilities³ in the Birds Directive’s Article 9 to protect flora, fauna and fisheries against damage by cormorants to do so.

2) EAA urges the introduction of regional management plans. A Nordic-Baltic area management, plan or cooperation scheme could be a first.

- **The Nordic-Baltic area** hosts more than 50% of Europe’s population of nesting cormorants⁴. The cormorants from this area cause problems not only in the Nordic-Baltic area but in many European countries during migration and winter.

- **Denmark, Sweden and Finland** regularly conduct counts of ‘their’ cormorants and have good knowledge of the birds’ migration patterns⁵. This is basic data and knowledge needed for a science based cross-border management scheme. All states around the Baltic Sea manage cormorants in various ways and to varying degree, but not in coordination with other countries.

- **Not all Baltic states need to be involved from the outset.** And the scheme could be open for other states, which might show an interest in attending e.g. Norway and UK.

3) EAA urges a substantial but phased reduction of the European cormorant population. ‘Adaptive management’⁶ is an approach suitable for this purpose. It would safeguard the cormorant’s ‘good conservation status’ from one year to another. Population reduction will help ‘everywhere’ and reduce management efforts and costs.

¹ European Parliament resolution of 4 December 2008 “on [the adoption of a European Cormorant Management Plan](#) to minimise the increasing impact of cormorants on fish stocks, fishing and aquaculture”

² Answer given by Mr Potočník on behalf of the Commission, [13 July 2010](#)

³ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/pdf/guidance_cormorants.pdf

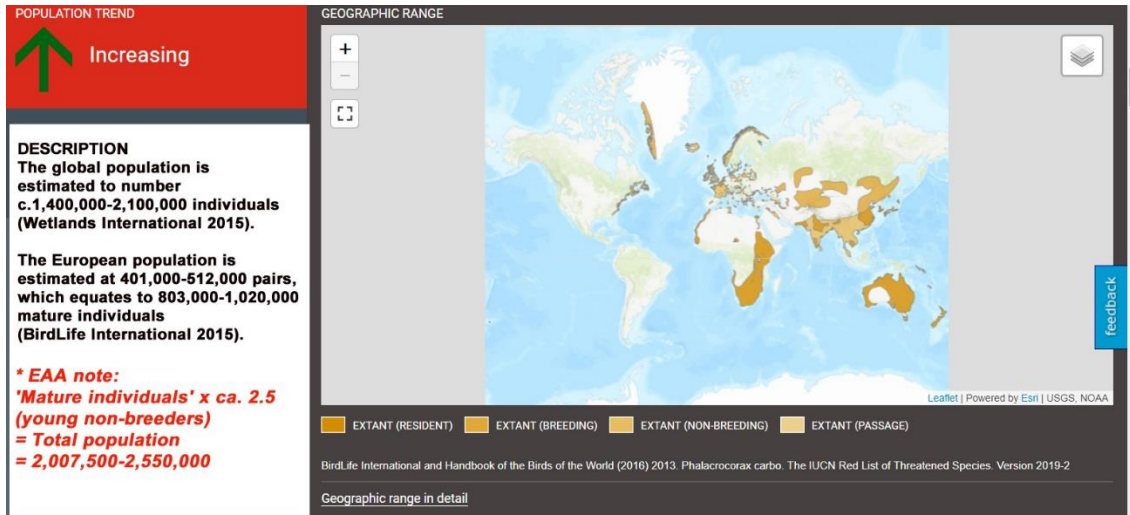
⁴ “Breeding numbers of Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* in the Western Palearctic, 2012-2013”; Bregnballe et al. ; Table 1.6, page 42 <https://dce2.au.dk/pub/SR99.pdf> Population development of Great cormorant ; [HELCOM \(May 2019\)](#)

⁵ [Migration Patterns in Europe](#)” (Oct 2018); J. Sterup, T. Bregnballe, M. Frederiksen & K. T. Pedersen

⁶ [“The ecosystem approach and adaptive management”](#), FAO

The Great Cormorant – World and Europe

The most common species of cormorant in Europe is the Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), with the two barely distinguishable subspecies *Phalacrocorax carbo carbo* ('Atlantic cormorant') and *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* ('Continental cormorant'). The *carbo*-variant lives on both sides of the Atlantic, from North America over Greenland to Western Europe. The *sinensis*-variant now has a range that is totally connected with its natural range in Asia.



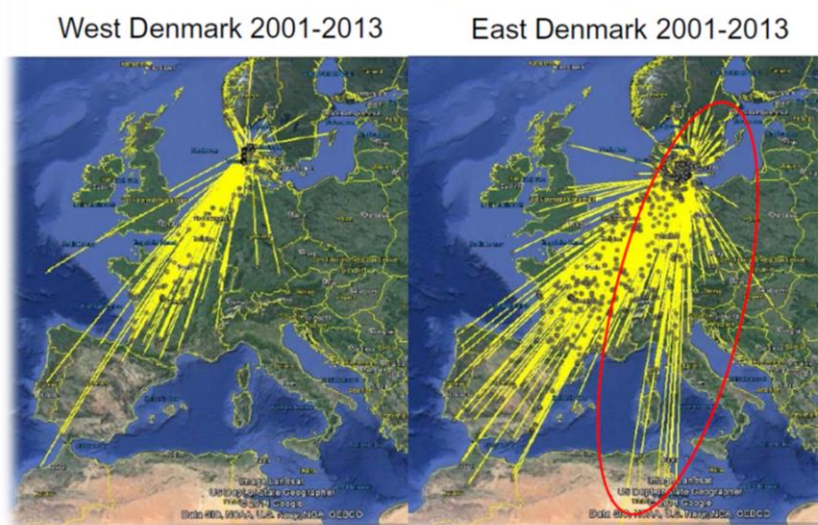
Source: www.iucnredlist.org/species/22696792/132592923#population

Cormorants are found both at sea, coasts and around inland waters. Generally, they favour large waters, but when fish stocks become insufficient on those preferred sites they also hunt in smaller rivers. A couple of cold winters in Denmark forced cormorants into small ice-free streams, where they do much damage to fish stocks. They are still hunting there. They didn't forget or gave up these new feeding grounds, unfortunately.

A highly migratory bird

After the breeding season the cormorants disperse over greater or lesser distances. Cormorants in the cool temperate zones of the northern hemisphere often migrate hundreds of kilometres south in winter.

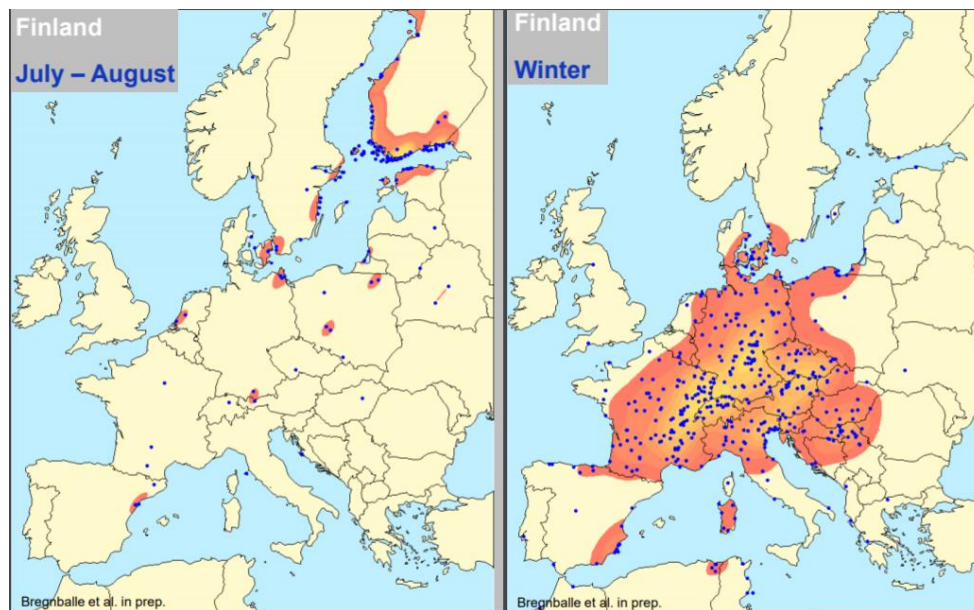
Location of ringing/breeding area



Source: 'Migration Patterns in Europe'⁷

⁷www.nina.no/Portals/NINA/Bilder%20og%20dokumenter/Arrangementer/2018_Skarvekonferanse/Sterup_Cormorant%20Migration%20in%20Europe.pdf

Finland: During the winter months almost all cormorants have left the country



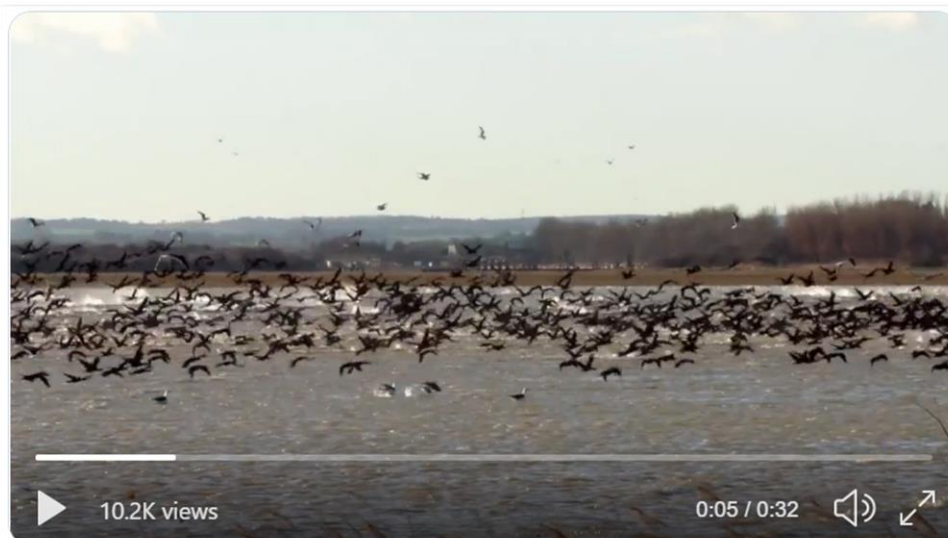
Source: 'Migration Patterns in Europe'⁸

Cormorants eat rarely anything else than fish, 400-600 grams per day. They are opportunists in the sense that they do not have any preference for any fish species but eat whichever are easiest to catch in the waters where they are. They most commonly catch fish between 10 and 25 cm long, but sometimes catch and consume fish up to 60 cm and 1 kg.

Hunting in flocks

"Cormorants are generally gregarious, nesting in colonies, gathering in flocks and often also hunting together in groups, which sometimes number up to 4,000 birds."⁹ This is the huge problem in about all European countries, also countries with no cormorant colonies! A passing flock can devastate a small stream or lake very quickly.

Video: Ca. 1,000 cormorants hunting together. England SE, Sandwich Bay¹⁰



8:10 PM · Feb 11, 2018 · [Twitter Media Studio](#)

Source: Screenshot of @BBC Countryfile video – Twitter

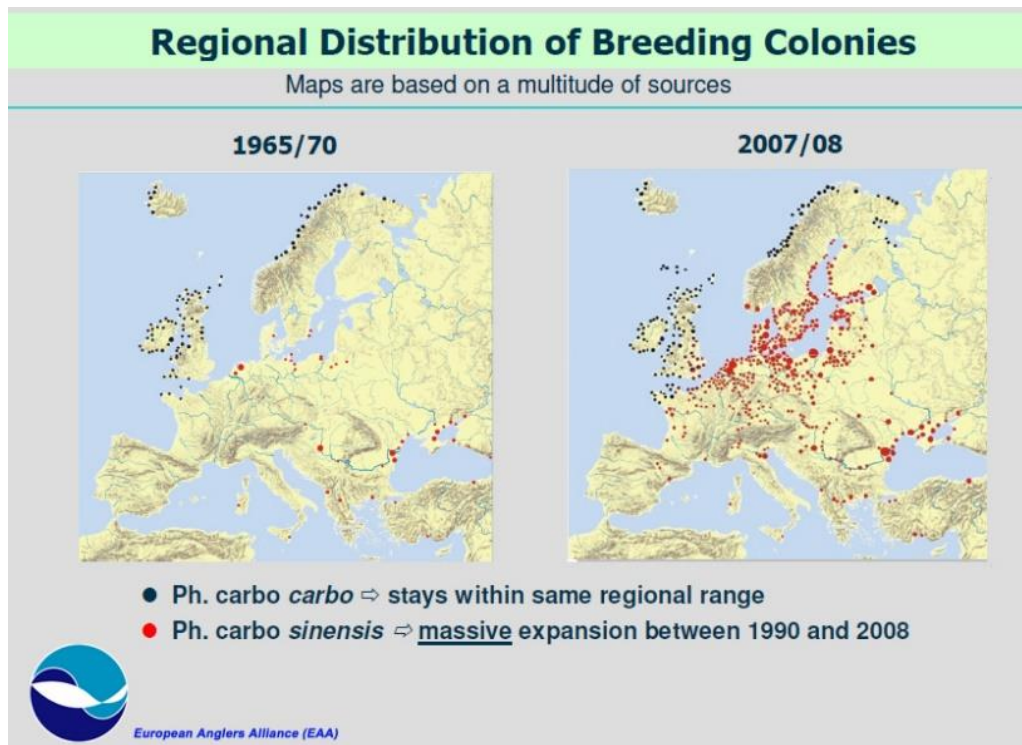
⁸www.nina.no/Portals/NINA/Bilder%20og%20dokumenter/Arrangementer/2018_Skarvekonferanse/Sterup_Cormorant%20Migration%20in%20Europe.pdf

⁹<https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/cormorants/faq.htm>

¹⁰<https://twitter.com/BBCCountryfile/status/962765702196117504>

A dramatic increase in the sinensis population

The conservation of the cormorants' breeding sites, and the protection measures following the Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) of 1979 are among the instruments, which have led to a disproportionate and virtually explosive growth in the cormorant population. The birds, the continental species (*sinensis*), have now also taken up residence far outside their traditional breeding grounds in regions where they didn't occur originally for example in the Nordic countries.



Source: *How many Cormorants in Europe? – EAA documentation*¹¹

The total autumn population in Europe is estimated **>2 million birds** (2014)¹². This very abundant population has a significant impact on local fish populations and fishing in many areas of the European Union.

The cormorant has no natural enemies of great importance. Sea eagles are on the increase but the effect on the cormorant population is miniscule.

With a daily consumption of 400-600 grams of fish, 2 million European cormorants need 1 million kg of fish every day, or more than 300 000 tons of fish every year. 300 000 tons is more, for example, than the combined fish production from aquaculture of France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Very seriously are the losses of fish species which are already endangered, such as e.g. eel, trout, sea-trout, salmon, grayling and the common nase (*Chondrostoma nasus*). The bird causes considerable losses among salmon smolts during their downstream migration to the sea as well as in the estuaries. For example, the aggregated smolt mortality in the Skjern River and in the Ringkøbing Fjord (Denmark) by cormorants amounted to 48% in some years¹³. These heavy losses threaten the indigenous Atlantic salmon population in the River Skjern.

¹¹ [How many Cormorants in Europe?](#) - A Documentation of EAA, Author: Franz Kohl (ÖKF); (2015)

¹² Ibid

¹³ [Salmon and sea-trout in Denmark and impact of cormorant predation](#); N. Jepsen, DTU Aqua (2019)
[Causes of mortality of Atlantic Salmon \(*Salmo salar*\) and brown trout \(*Salmo trutta*\) smolts in a restored river and its estuary](#); Anders Koed (2006)

Results from Ringkøbing Fjord 2000 – 2004¹⁴

Telemetry (2000, 2002): Salmon smolts 40 – 50 % of tags were recovered from one colony.

CW-tagging (2003, 2004): 25 % of the available tagged salmon smolts were eaten during the 3-weeks smolt migration period. 40 – 50 % of tagged eel were eaten in one year. All (100%) of tagged flounders eaten in 15 days.

Pellet analyses: 30,000 salmon smolts, 1.4 million flounders, 38,000 eel were eaten.

More recent studies and figures are presented in the paper “Great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) predation on juvenile down-migrating trout (*Salmo trutta*) in a lowland stream” (2019)¹⁵

In the last 25 years, trout and especially grayling populations all over Europe have suffered heavily from the predation by cormorants on a scale never seen before. In many of the affected areas, nobody seems to remember having seen cormorants in such large numbers. In fact, old records show no presence of breeding colonies of cormorants in these areas in the past.

Poor fishing means less recreational angling. The recreational angling sector loses participants and the dependent businesses like the tackle trade, tourism and more loses revenue and jobs. Based on various national and EU studies EAA estimates that 25 million Europeans go angling of which 8-10 million fish only or also at sea. A recent study ordered by the European Parliament concluded for recreational sea angling alone:

“Total economic impact of marine recreational fishing amounts to 10.5 billion euro, supporting almost 100,000 jobs.”¹⁶

Event at the European Parliament 9 October 2018

Cormorant: management needed across the borders

- arranged by the RecFishing Forum



Jean-Claude Bel (EFTA CEO), Niels Jepsen (DTU Aqua), Markus Lundgren (SportFiskarna), Olaf Linder (DAFV), Fred Bloot (EAA president) MEP Annie Schreijer-Pierik and MEP Werner Kuhn

Report and presentations can be downloaded [here](#)

Forum for Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

Conference

Cormorant: management needed across the borders

Tuesday 9 October
18:30 – 20:00
Room: A5E3

Co-chaired by
MEPs Annie Schreijer-Pierik and Werner Kuhn
EN-NL interpretation



¹⁴ The conflict between cormorants and fisheries. FACTS AND MANAGEMENT; N. Jepsen, [DTU Aqua \(2016\)](#)

¹⁵ By Kristi Källo, Henrik Baktoft, Niels Jepsen, Kim Aarestrup; ICES Journal of Marine Science, Volume 77, Issue 2, March 2020, Pages 721–729, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsz227>; (Dec 2019)

¹⁶ Research for PECH Committee - Marine recreational and semi-subsistence fishing - its value and its impact on fish stocks; (2017); [Kieran HYDER et al.](#)