

SIGHTING OF BANDED BRANDT'S CORMORANT *PHALACROCORAX PENICILLATUS* ON HAIDA GWAI

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Brandt's Cormorant *Phalacrocorax penicillatus* is one of three species of cormorant found along the west coast of North America. Highest breeding concentrations occur along the California and Oregon coasts, where rich upwellings from the California Current are strong during spring and summer. Five breeding colonies, all on Vancouver Island, are known in Canada, although never more than two have been active in any given year (Campbell et al. 1990). Brandt's Cormorant is suspected of occasionally breeding on Sartine Island (Vermeer 1976), although this has never been confirmed. It has also occasionally bred as far north as south east Alaska (Wallace and Wallace 1998).

Brandt's Cormorant is unusual in that after the breeding season, when the effects of the California Current upwelling diminish, many migrate northwards along the coast, some as far as Prince William Sound, Alaska. On Haida Gwaii it is commonly seen during winter and early spring, but by late April most have returned to their breeding grounds (Campbell et al. 1990). In Laskeek Bay it has been recorded in most years since research began in 1984 (Gaston and Jones 1991; Gaston 2003), although few sightings have been made since 2004 (Laskeek Bay Conservation Society, unpublished data). The lack of sightings in recent years is probably a reflection of the later opening of field camps, rather than any trend in abundance. Most sightings have been in March and April but sightings in May and June have also been recorded. In this note we document the occurrence of a banded subadult Brandt's Cormorant as well as a number of adults in breeding plumage at Reef Islet, Laskeek Bay.



Figure 1

Brandt's Cormorants observed among Steller sea lions on Reef Islet, Laskeek Bay on 15 April 2008. Note white tufts on the breeding adults. Photo: W. Szaniszló

On 15 April 2008, we conducted a survey of Steller sea lions *Eumetopias jubatus* at the haulouts in Laskeek Bay. Animals hauled out on the rocks were photographed by WS using a Nikon D70 digital camera with an 80 – 400 mm f4.5-5.6 ED AF zoom lens. While doing so, we noted and photographed seven cormorants, some of which had unusual tufts of white feathers extending back from the side of the head. When we examined these photographs in greater detail on a laptop computer we found that three of the birds had a bright blue gular pouch with pale yellowish feathers posterior of the pouch, as well as tufts of white feathers on their head and/or wings, indicating that they were Brandt's Cormorants in breeding plumage (Fig. 1). The remaining four cormorants in the photographs had a browner plumage suggesting that they were sub-adults. We also noted that one of the sub-adults carried a yellow band on its right

leg and a metallic band on its left leg (Fig. 2). This combination of bands is consistent with Brandt's Cormorants banded as nestlings on South Farallon Island (latitude 37° 41' N, longitude 123° 00' W), California in 2006 (R. Bradley, personal communication).



Figure 2
Close up of Brandt's Cormorants
photographed on Reef Islet, Laskeek Bay, 15
April 2008. Note the yellow and silver bands
on the legs of the second bird from the left.
Photo: W. Szanislo.

Brandt's Cormorant nesting activities on the Farallon Islands have been monitored and young have been banded for nearly four decades (Wallace and Wallace 1998). In a study spanning the years 1971 to 1982, 399 first year Brandt's cormorants were banded and their dispersal monitored. After fledging, most moved northward along the coast to northern California and Oregon where they spent the winter. A small number of banded birds were recovered in B.C. but none were further north than the north end of Vancouver Island (Campbell et al. 1990, Gaston et al. 2008). To the best of our knowledge, our sighting marks the furthest north record for a bird banded on the Farallones.

Brandt's cormorants are relatively common visitors to Haida Gwaii during winter and sightings have often included birds in breeding plumage. By April however, breeding birds are beginning to return south, and only non-breeding birds are seen during May and June. This is consistent with studies on Farallon Island, which have found that males usually arrive back at breeding colony by late April to early May, while females do not return until early to mid May (Wallace and Wallace 1998). Hence, for breeding birds to be seen in Laskeek Bay in mid April 2008 may not be unusually late. In fact, nesting activities on the Farallones were very late in 2008, and reproductive success was low (R. Bradley, personal communication), so this apparent tardiness in returning to the colony may have actually been typical of most breeding cormorants that year. In previous years, disruptions in breeding activities such as this were usually associated with an El Niño event, which influences nutrient-rich upwellings and causes declines in prey abundance (Wallace and Wallace 1998; Wilson 1991). However, La Niña conditions prevailed between August 2007 and May 2008 (NOAA Climate Prediction Center. http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina/), so this does not explain the late season and poor reproductive success.

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