

Before the Trees Come Down: Protect Dog Island's Cormorant Colony

A native Great Lakes bird needs a voice

In February, Michigan State Representative Alicia St. Germaine began a public campaign calling for “stronger management” of cormorants. She contacted the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and members of Congress, advocating for increased control of cormorant populations.

St. Germaine, a Harrison Township resident, has focused particular attention on the cormorant colony on Dog Island at Lake St. Clair Metropark. According to information provided to park visitors by Metroparks staff, the DNR may remove the dead nesting trees on Dog Island after the cormorants migrate, potentially as early as November or December. At this time, however, we have not been able to locate a publicly available DNR plan or announced date for this work.

That uncertainty makes it especially important for the public to ask questions **before the trees come down.**

In June, a highly one-sided article published in local newspapers portrayed cormorants as a major threat to the Lake St. Clair ecosystem and called for the removal of their nesting habitat. The article reported that the DNR

planned to cut down the trees and then “track to see where the birds go from there.”

In July, Michigan appropriated **\$500,000 for cormorant-control efforts**. The funding is part of a statewide program established under Michigan law to control and manage Double-crested Cormorants. Representative Ste. Germaine has publicly highlighted the appropriation as funding for cormorant control.

But before this money is used to alter wildlife habitat on Dog Island, the public deserves to understand exactly what problem the proposed action is intended to solve.

Cormorants are native birds, not an invasive species

Double-crested Cormorants are native North American birds. Their dramatic recovery is one of the more notable wildlife conservation stories of the Great Lakes.

Cormorant populations were severely affected during the era of widespread DDT use and other environmental contaminants. As those contaminants declined and reproductive success improved, their populations recovered dramatically. Michigan has recognized the species' recovery by removing the Double-crested Cormorant from the state's list of threatened and endangered species.

That recovery has sometimes created conflict with fisheries and human activities. But a successful recovery does not transform a native species into an invasive one.

The distinction matters.

What are cormorants actually eating?

Much of the recent public discussion has focused on the amount of fish cormorants consume. Cormorants do eat substantial quantities of fish, and there are circumstances in which their predation can affect particular fish populations.

But their diets are opportunistic and vary greatly according to the fish available in a particular location.

Great Lakes research has repeatedly documented cormorants consuming abundant forage fish, including round gobies, alewives and other small fish. In a U.S. Geological Survey study of cormorants in Saginaw Bay, **round gobies were the dominant prey, accounting for more than half of the fish consumed by number**, while yellow perch represented only about 8 percent of prey by number.

Research elsewhere in the Great Lakes has similarly found substantial consumption of round gobies. In fact, a long-term study at Little Galloo Island in Lake Ontario found that when invasive round gobies became abundant,

cormorants shifted their diets toward gobies and away from some native sport fish, including yellow perch and smallmouth bass.

This does not mean that cormorants have no effect on fisheries. They can affect particular fish populations under particular circumstances, and legitimate fisheries concerns deserve to be taken seriously.

It does mean, however, that the familiar image of cormorants simply “eating all the game fish” is an oversimplification.

Even the often-cited calculation that thousands of cormorants can consume several tons of fish per day tells us very little without knowing **what species those fish are**. Five tons of fish is a very different ecological story if much of that biomass consists of abundant round gobies and alewives rather than bass and perch.

Management decisions should therefore be based on **site-specific evidence about Lake St. Clair**, including what the Dog Island cormorants are actually eating and whether they are having a measurable effect on sport-fish populations.

Yes, cormorants can kill trees. But is removing their habitat the answer?

There is no question that large cormorant colonies can damage trees. Accumulated guano changes soil chemistry and can eventually kill nesting trees.

But dead trees are not necessarily an ecological disaster. Snags and fallen trees are natural components of many wetland and island ecosystems and can provide habitat for insects, birds, reptiles, amphibians and other wildlife.

More importantly, **Dog Island is an uninhabited island.**

There are currently no plans to develop the island for human use. There are no plans for buildings, recreational facilities, or other changes that would require the cormorant colony to be displaced.

That raises an important question:

If cormorants are going to nest somewhere, isn't an isolated island preferable to someone's backyard, marina, or other human-use area?

Removing the nesting trees will not make cormorants disappear. It could simply force them to seek new nesting locations.

If they establish colonies elsewhere, particularly along the mainland or in areas heavily used by people, conflicts could actually increase.

Dog Island provides something increasingly rare: a place where a native wildlife colony can exist with relatively little direct conflict with humans.

What about boater safety?

There may be a legitimate safety concern associated with dead trees falling into the water. That concern should not be dismissed.

But if public safety is the reason for removing the trees, we should first ask whether there are alternatives that could address the hazard without eliminating the island's wildlife habitat.

Could hazardous areas be marked with buoys?

Could a danger zone around the island be clearly identified and kept clear of boat traffic?

Could only trees presenting an immediate hazard be addressed while leaving suitable nesting habitat intact?

These are reasonable questions that deserve consideration before an entire nesting habitat is removed.

What problem are we actually trying to solve?

Michigan now has a statewide statutory program for managing Double-crested Cormorants, along with an

additional \$500,000 in public funding for cormorant-control efforts.

That makes transparency and science-based decision-making more important, not less.

Before the trees on Dog Island are removed, the public should know:

What specific problem is the proposed tree removal intended to solve?

What scientific evidence demonstrates that removing the trees will solve it?

Has a site-specific assessment of the Dog Island colony and its diet been conducted?

What effect are the cormorants having on Lake St. Clair's sport-fish populations?

What alternatives to removing the nesting habitat have been considered?

And where will these birds go if their existing nesting habitat disappears?

These are not unreasonable questions. They are exactly the questions that should be asked whenever public funds are used to alter wildlife habitat.

A conservation success story worth protecting

The return of the Double-crested Cormorant is part of the larger story of the Great Lakes' environmental recovery. These birds survived a period of extraordinary human-caused environmental damage and have returned to places where they were once greatly reduced.

Their recovery has brought legitimate challenges. Wildlife management sometimes requires difficult decisions and careful balancing of competing interests.

But Dog Island presents an unusual circumstance. It is an uninhabited island where cormorants have established a colony without occupying land intended for human development.

Before we destroy that habitat, we should be certain that doing so is necessary, effective, and better for the ecosystem than the alternatives.

The goal should not be to protect cormorants at any cost. The goal should be responsible, science-based management that considers the birds, the fishery, public safety, and the ecological value of Lake St. Clair.

As birders and park visitors, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to observe these fascinating native birds at

Lake St. Clair Metropark. Watching cormorants fish, raise their young, and interact with other species offers a remarkable window into the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Before the trees come down, let's make sure we have answered the questions.

Please speak up for Dog Island's cormorants.

Contact Michigan decision-makers and ask them to:

- **Protect the existing cormorant nesting habitat on Dog Island unless its removal can be demonstrated to be necessary.**
- **Make any DNR plans for Dog Island publicly available.**
- **Require site-specific scientific evidence before removing the colony's nesting habitat.**
- **Consider alternatives, including marking hazardous areas with buoys if boater safety is the concern.**
- **Use science-based, nonlethal approaches whenever they can effectively address legitimate wildlife-management concerns.**

Dog Island belongs to the Great Lakes ecosystem. Let's make sure its wildlife has a place there, too.

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