



Bald Eagles team up to kill Double-crested Cormorant near Blind River, Ontario

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On 20 November 2018, I was sitting drinking coffee and looking out my living room window overlooking the North Channel of Lake Huron, just east of Blind River, Ontario, and watching 18 Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). They were resting on thin ice that had formed near shore from the previous night's -16°C temperature. It was a sunny day with a bit of blue sky breaking through the light grey clouds. I noticed the shadow of a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) following the shoreline. The gulls saw the eagle and rose in unison, flying towards the open water. Their concern was short-lived because the eagle disappeared around a point and they settled back down on the ice. I remember how rare it was to see an eagle or find an eagle's nest when I first moved to Blind River, Ontario, in 1985. It is now common to see both mature and immature

eagles flying along the North Channel of Lake Huron but I still watch and follow every one until it is out of sight.

Seeing the eagle that morning reminded me of another sunny day, 11 April 2015, when my friend, Mark Galsworthy, and I walked out onto the frozen North Channel from Algoma Mills, Ontario. We had to step over a large crack and pressure ridge to get onto the ice, which was starting to thaw and pull away from shore. It had felt good to be going out for a day fishing for herring near the mouth of Lauzon Creek. We drilled a dozen holes through the ice approximately 100 m out from shore. I was walking from hole to hole, jigging a small silver spoon intent on catching a fish for supper when Mark shouted, "Here comes one of your buddies!" I looked up and saw a Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

flying about 8 m above the ice, 50 m or so away. The cormorant was heading toward the open water at the mouth of the creek and flying right behind it were two adult Bald Eagles about 10 m apart. The eagles were gaining on the cormorant and the three birds overshot the patch of open water and continued on for approximately 700 m. I could make out that all three birds had landed on the ice but it was too far to see what happened next and I wished I had brought binoculars. A brisk cold wind had started and we decided to head back to shore.

Mid-morning the next day found us back at the same location quietly sitting on our pails fishing. I looked toward Magazine Rock (46.180766° N, 82.779245° W), a cormorant nesting site I had visited many times, and saw three birds flying towards us. As they came closer, I was surprised to once again see an adult cormorant flanked by two adult eagles. This time the eagles were much closer to, and slightly above, the cormorant. As the eagles were closing in on it, the cormorant slid down onto the ice and made a dash up into the rocks on shore. Both eagles landed with it and the larger eagle quickly over-took the cormorant and sat on it. After a few minutes, the eagle dragged the cormorant back out onto the ice and started to feed on it, with the second eagle waiting

approximately 20 m away. When the larger bird finished feeding and flew off, the second eagle flew over and fed on what was left of the dead cormorant. After feeding, it flew off and I decided to walk over and see what was left of the cormorant. As I started to walk towards it, an immature Bald Eagle flew to the remains and immediately started to feed. I had not noticed it before and when it saw me, it half carried, half dragged the remains 100 m further away. I stopped and waited until it flew off before walking over to inspect the remains. Only an hour had passed but most of the muscle had been stripped from the carcass, leaving only the wings, legs and head. I had seen Bald Eagles feeding on cormorant chicks several times before but this was the first time I had actually seen an adult cormorant being killed by an eagle. I believe the two adult eagles were a pair who, working together, had a successful hunting strategy for catching early returning adult cormorants when ice still covered the North Channel.

Todd *et al.* (1982) mention seeing "... occasional cooperation between two hunting eagles." They also reported finding remains of Double-crested Cormorants at 2-8% of Bald Eagle nests




Bald Eagles. Photos: Eleanor Kee Wellman ©

and perch sites they searched in Maine. Beyond that report, it is well known that Bald Eagles will harass cormorants as well as kill and feed on cormorant eggs, young and adults; documentation comes from Manitoba (Hobson *et al.* 1989, Hunt *et al.* 1992), British Columbia (Giebrecht 2001, Van Damme and Colonel 2007) and Minnesota (Wendels *et al.* 2016). The current record may be the first documentation from Ontario.

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