

## THE BRANDT'S CORMORANT IN ALASKA

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The Brandt's Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*) breeds along the Pacific coast of North America from Baja California north to south-coastal Alaska (AOU 1998, Wallace and Wallace 1998). In Alaska, it is a rare, local breeder, with nesting documented at only a few locations (Wallace and Wallace 1998). The nearest nesting locations south of Alaska are located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990). Although this species has been presumed to winter along the southern coast of Alaska (AOU 1983, AOU 1998, Wallace and Wallace 1998), there have been no formally published mid-winter records for the state. Furthermore, it has been nearly 30 years since this species' status in Alaska has been summarized (Kessel and Gibson 1978). Here we present new information on the regular winter occurrence of the Brandt's Cormorant in the Ketchikan area of southeast Alaska, and we provide a review of its historical occurrence in the state based on published information, including regional reports in *American Birds* (AB), unpublished information obtained from other observers, and unpublished data archived at the University of Alaska Museum (UAM), Fairbanks.

The city of Ketchikan is located on Revillagigedo Island, one of the southernmost islands of the Alexander Archipelago in southeast Alaska (Figure 1). On the basis of

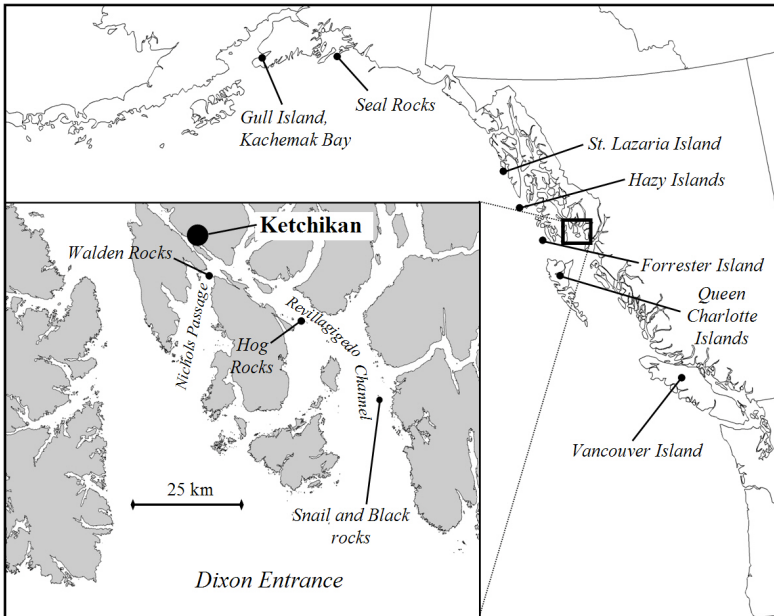


Figure 1. Coastal Alaska and British Columbia, showing the Ketchikan area, Alaska (inset), and locations mentioned in the text.

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our personal observations from 1990 to 2005, we consider the Brandt's Cormorant to be an uncommon winter visitant in the Ketchikan area, and we have found it annually in small numbers from November (earliest, 2 November 2002) through April (latest, 2 May 2004 and 20 May 2006). It occurs primarily in the exposed waters of Revillagigedo Channel and Nichols Passage, just south of Ketchikan. These waters are accessible only by boat and had seldom been visited by ornithologists or birders. A Brandt's Cormorant in Revillagigedo Channel on 16 November 1980 was the first one recorded in the Ketchikan area (AB 35:214, 1981). We have found at least one bird on nearly all of our visits to these areas (more than 30 records), and we collected one specimen in Nichols Passage on 31 January 1998 (UAM 7857, immature male, S. C. Heinl and J. T. Hunt). Our largest counts have been 15 in a roosting flock of >200 cormorants at Hog Rocks, Revillagigedo Channel, on 11 February 2000 (S. C. Heinl, J. T. Hunt, A. W. Piston, R. L. Scher, D. W. Sonneborn); 15 at Snail and Black rocks, Revillagigedo Channel, on 21 April 2006 (Figure 2); 5 near Walden Rocks, Nichols Passage, on 8 March 1997; and 5 at Ketchikan on 4 February 2001. Our observations have included both immatures and adults. Many of the adults are in alternate plumage by February, with large patches of white filoplumes on the sides of the neck and on the scapulars. Except for a few nonbreeding stragglers, cormorants of all species leave the Ketchikan area during the breeding season.

In contrast to our data from the Ketchikan area, nearly all other Alaska records of the Brandt's Cormorant come from isolated offshore islands, some of which support breeding colonies of seabirds. In addition, nearly all other records of this species come from the breeding season, when a majority of the visits to offshore sites have taken place. The first Alaska record was of a specimen collected by George Willett at Forrester Island, off the southernmost coast of southeast Alaska, on 2 June 1917 (Willett 1918). Although Willett spent entire breeding seasons at Forrester Island, from 1914 to 1917 and in 1920, and a small part of 1919 (Willett 1915, 1917, 1918, 1920), this specimen was the only Brandt's Cormorant he observed, and he considered it a straggler (Willett 1923). Malcolm E. Isleib (in litt.) observed 20 Brandt's Cormorants and collected the second Alaska specimen (UAM 6149, adult male) at Lowrie Island, near Forrester Island, on 14 September 1992.

Thirteen Brandt's Cormorants and four nests at Seal Rocks, Hinchinbrook Entrance, Prince William Sound, on 22 July 1972 provided the first nesting record for Alaska (Isleib and Kessel 1973). The Seal Rocks site apparently supported only a minor colony of breeding birds (primarily Black-legged Kittiwakes, *Rissa tridactyla*) and was not habitable by cormorants prior to uplift by the 1964 Alaska earthquake (Isleib and Kessel 1973). Small numbers of Brandt's Cormorants were found during the breeding season at Seal Rocks as late as 1978 (maximum, 21 birds; Kessel and Gibson 1978), but they apparently abandoned it sometime thereafter (Hatch 1993). Isleib also found one Brandt's Cormorant at Fish Island, in the Wooded Islands, about 38 km southwest of Seal Rocks on 16 August 1973 (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

Although no longer known to nest at Seal Rocks, the species apparently still occurs at least sporadically in the Gulf of Alaska region. An adult was observed at the seabird colony at Gull Island, Kachemak Bay, lower Cook Inlet, on 21 June 1987, but none were found there subsequently (AB 41:1475, 1987); this is the westernmost Alaska record. In 2000, Alan DeMartini (in litt.) made two observations of adult Brandt's Cormorants in the Gulf of Alaska: one off the coast of Cape Fairweather (approximately 500 km southeast of Hinchinbrook Entrance) on 21 June 2000, and one to three near Hinchinbrook Entrance 22–24 June 2000.

Nesting Brandt's Cormorants were discovered in southeast Alaska at St. Lazaria Island, near Sitka, on 13 June 1984 (J. D. Webster; 20 nests and 130 birds; Nelson et al. 1987). Webster found three birds at St. Lazaria on 19 June 1985 (UAM, unpubl. data), but this species has not been found there subsequently, despite the fact that the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has maintained an annual research camp

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on the island since 1994 (L. Slater pers. comm.). Finally, USFWS biologists found nesting Brandt's Cormorants at the Hazy Islands, off the coast of southern southeast Alaska, on 25 June 1982 (23 pairs; Nelson et al. 1987) and 18 July 2000 (57 adults and 40 nests; L. Slater pers. comm.). Those dates represent the only visits to the Hazy Islands by the USFWS. Up to 50 Brandt's Cormorants have been seen on the one grassy island in the Hazy Islands on several occasions from the mid-1990s to 2000 and annually in late June and early July 2001–2005 (J. King and W. P. Taylor in litt.). Those observations were peripheral to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's studies of Steller's Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*), and accurate counts of the number of birds and nests were not made.

Our records show that the Brandt's Cormorant is clearly a regular winter visitant in small numbers to the Ketchikan area, extending the known winter range of this species north to the southernmost waters of southeast Alaska. In addition, our observations provide Alaska's only winter records, and we found no evidence to suggest that this species winters north to Prince William Sound (contra AOU 1983, AOU 1998, Wallace and Wallace 1998). The Brandt's Cormorant is an uncommon winter visitant and rare spring and fall visitant to the nearby northern Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, where it has been found at Langara and Graham islands (P. Hamel in litt.). High counts there include 50 in Masset Inlet on 14 April 1935 (Campbell et al. 1990), 28 near Masset on 18 December 1982, and 21 in Skidegate Inlet on 26 July 1997 (P. Hamel in litt.). Small numbers were also recorded in 19 of the 25 most recent years on the Masset Christmas Bird Count. Thus the Brandt's Cormorant has probably been a regular winter visitant to the Dixon Entrance area for some time.



Figure 2. Seven Brandt's Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*) and seven Pelagic Cormorants (*P. pelagicus*) at Black Rock, Revillagigedo Channel, in southeast Alaska, 21 April 2006.

Photo by S. C. Heinl

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(Dixon Entrance is the large body of open water that separates the islands of southeast Alaska from the islands of coastal British Columbia; Figure 1.) We have not visited the Dixon Entrance area during the winter, but, on the basis of our records and the records from the north shore of the Queen Charlottes, the Brandt's Cormorant is also present on the Alaska (northern) side during the winter. It is not known whether the adult birds that winter in the Ketchikan area breed elsewhere in Alaska or, perhaps just as likely, migrate to breeding colonies somewhere south of Alaska.

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