

PENNSYLVANIA ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE  
613 Howard Road, West Chester, PA 19380

29 January 2003

Katrina Knight  
PO Box 12823  
Reading, PA 19612

Dear Katrina,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Neotropic Cormorant on 5 October 2000 at Lake Ontelaunee. After careful review, the Committee has voted not to accept this record.

Because of differing views among the members, balloting went two rounds before a decision (which is why the result was delayed). Ultimately two members favored acceptance and five voted against acceptance.

Those voting against it placed the record in Class IV-A as "a record for which there exists a majority of evidence in support of the observer's identification; the record is probably correct, but not beyond reasonable doubt." These members' general view was that details with no gaps would have been advisable for acceptance of the first state record of a species with no pattern of vagrancy in the Northeast. Following are several of the members' comments, which sum up the majority's reluctance to accept the report:

\* "A very intriguing report, and likely correct but without more precise description of the bill, lores, and facial skin I can't be 100% sure.

\* "This is a very close call for me, but I continue to think that a first state record of a species that is not an obvious ID requires a complete and perfect description (including the gular pouch in this case) or photographs."

\* "While some of the description suggests Neotropic Cormorant, other important details are lacking; for example, no mention of the shape of the gular pouch is given. I would not be comfortable with accepting this record without good-quality photos."

Let me emphasize that our non-acceptance does not imply a belief that the bird was not a Neotropic Cormorant, but simply that the Committee felt that such an extreme rarity requires more complete evidence. We hope that our non-acceptance in this case will not discourage you from submitting reports on any future rarities you find.

Sincerely,



For the Committee:  
Paul Hess, Chair

Record No. 070-01-2000

070-01-2000

-----Neotropic Cormorant report-----

Neotropic Cormorants - 2 at Lake Ontelaunee, Berks County, PA -  
10/5/2000

On the morning of October 5th (at about 9:15 AM) I went to Lake Ontelaunee to see what birds were there and to take my dog for a walk. My first stop was the pulloff on Rte 73 that looks across the lake towards Maiden Creek Station. There was a lot of mist over the lake and visibility was mostly limited to silhouettes. I could see several cormorants plus 2 or 3 smaller birds that I couldn't see well enough to identify. The small birds were just about at the limit of visibility, so I decided to drive around to West Shore Drive and try to view them from the other direction. From that spot the birds were still somewhat distant but closer than they were at the first spot. I still couldn't see much in the way of color due to the bad lighting and mist. I could see that there were a total of 14 cormorants, but two of them appeared noticeably smaller than the rest, despite the fact that they were closer than some of the larger-appearing birds. This confused me, to say the least. Double-crested Cormorants are the only cormorants normally seen here. There have been a few records of Great Cormorants in the area, so I checked to make sure that the larger cormorants were not Great Cormorants. It was obvious that they were Double-crested. If the larger birds were Double-crested what were the smaller ones? First I tried to convince myself that they were young-of-the-year who weren't fully grown yet, but cormorants do not breed at Ontelaunee and it was late in the year for there to be such an obvious size difference. Besides being about a third smaller, the odd cormorants appeared to be a somewhat different shape. They sat lower in the water, with the base of their tails appearing to be in the water, but the rest of the tail seemed to stick out higher. After noticing this, I thought maybe they were just swimming in a different position, but after watching them for a while that did not seem to be a good explanation. After about a half hour of watching, I decided I needed to look at a field guide, so I went to get the one I keep in the car. I couldn't find it. Feeling frustrated, I decided that I'd tortured my poor dog long enough and took her for a long walk at the end of the lake. There were a bunch more cormorants there, but no odd ones. After the walk, I tried to get a better look at the odd cormorants from a couple different vantage points, with no luck. I went home to find a field guide and take care of some other responsibilities. Shortly after I got home, I got a call from Joan Silagy saying that the cormorants were Neotropic Cormorants. Matt Spence had seen them from Maiden Creek Station and called Joan and Harold Silagy to come see them. All three of them got good looks at the birds and were satisfied with that ID. The Silagys are familiar with Neotropics from their trips to New Mexico. After finishing the stuff I absolutely had to get done, I went back to Ontelaunee again, after grabbing my new Sibley guide (which I never bothered to open before leaving home). The cormorants weren't visible from Maiden Creek Station this time either, so I went back to the first spot where I'd seen them, arriving there at about 12:30. This time, the lighting was improved and most of the mist was gone and I could see some colors on the birds. I watched the small cormorants swimming in and out between the Double-crested, diving frequently. (They both dove much more frequently than the other cormorants.) Seeing them swim in front of the larger birds made it clear that I was right about their size. I could see that their bills were yellowish orange, not quite as bright as the Double-crested's bills and the tip of the bill seemed dull in color, making it hard to see. Below the eye, the yellow-orange color seemed to extend further back than it did on the Double-crested. I could not see the color of the lores well, but they did not stand out as being yellow-orange, so I think they were dark. In general, these

birds appeared all dark without the lighter throat and breast that young Double-crested have. After about 15-20 minutes, one of the birds took off and flew directly at me, then turned to fly toward the dam breast. As I followed it in my scope, I could see that the throat and breast were a deep, warm brown while the back and tail were glossy black. The neck appeared relatively short compared to the rest of the bird. (I attribute this to the bird having a longer tail more so than having a short neck, although I did not distinguish that at the time.) After seeing the first bird fly away, I watched the other, more distant bird for a few minutes and then decided to go see if I could find the bird that had flown, hoping for a closer look. I drove to the dam breast and parked there, spending a few minutes talking to a city water department employee who wanted to know what the birds on the lake were. When I got out to where I had a view of the lake, I could see two cormorants. The closer one was obviously a Double-crested, so I headed towards the other one, which was moving around a lot and staying under water quite a bit. I lost sight of that bird for a while while walking and never did find the bird I was looking for again. Either it kept going when it originally flew off or it moved out of viewing range while I was walking. I returned to the other spot to look for the bird that had stayed there when the first one flew and could not locate it again either. At this point I decided it was time to actually look at my field guide and figure out whether I was satisfied that the birds were Neotropical Cormorants. Altogether I watched these birds for somewhere between an hour and an hour and a half, spread out between 9:15 AM and 1 PM.

#### Elimination of other species:

These birds were about 1/3 smaller than the Double-crested Cormorants, the proportions of their bodies were different, their bills were a slightly different color and seemed shorter and the one which I saw best had a rich, brown neck and chest which I have never seen on a Double-crested. Great Cormorants are larger than Double-crested and have heavy, gray bills. Their plumage does not resemble these birds.

Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants both have dark bills and no yellow-orange on the face at all. Red-faced Cormorants have yellow bills, but as far as I know, they are yellow, not yellow-orange. The young ones have bills that are paler than these two birds. The adults have brighter yellow bills, but they also have red on their faces and they don't have the yellow color extending to behind the eye. Neither Red-faced nor Pelagic Cormorants should appear warm brown on the neck and chest. Brandt's Cormorants are not smaller than Double-crested. None of these three species have necks that are short compared to the length of their tails.

Anhingas are a much different shape in flight, with a fan-shaped tail and pointy wings. They have varying amounts of silvery in their wings. Their bill-shape is different as well and they generally don't act like these birds did. They are also larger than these birds were.

Loons can appear similar to cormorants from a distance, but no loon has all dark plumage with a yellow-orange bill and loons are generally more chunky looking than these birds were.

Other observers: No one was with me at any point while I watched these birds, but Matt Spence and Joan and Harold Silagy saw them separately from me.

070-01-2000

References consulted: The Sibley Guide to Birds, National Geographic field guide, 3rd edition and Cormorants, Darters and Pelicans of the World by Paul Johnsgard.

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Katrina Knight  
kknight@epix.net  
Reading, PA

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round One**

Species: Neotropic Cormorant ( Phalacrocorax brasilianus )

Date of Sighting: 5 October 2000 to 5 October 2000

Location: LAKE ONTELAUNEE

County: BERKS

Observer(s): Katrina Knight

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: Katrina Knight

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead				X				
D. Couchman			X					
P. Hess				X				
<del>R. Lokes</del> J. Stanley			X					
B. Reid			X					
<del>R. Lohmann</del> <del>P. Rodewald</del>			X					
M. Sharp				X				
TOTALS			4	3				
DECISION								

Comments: 4/3 - GO TO 2nd round

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Tabulation Form - Round Two**

Species: Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)

Date of Sighting: 5 October 2000 to 5 October 2001

Location: LAKE ONTELAUNEE

County: BERKS

Observer(s): Katrina Knight

Date of Submission: 2000

Submitted by: Katrina Knight

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead				X				
<del>D. Heather</del> D. Couchman				X				
P. Hess				X				
J. Stanley			X	<del>X</del>				
B. Reid			X					
R. Leberman				X				
M. Sharp				X				
TOTALS			2	5				
DECISION				X				

Comments: 2/5

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 6/30/02