1 Status of the breeding population of Great Cormorants in Austria in 2012

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National summary
In the summer of 2012, Austria had 65 occupied nests of Great Cormorants (Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis) in a total of three colonies. For the second year in a row this shows a decrease in the number of occupied nests compared to 2011 (85 nests) and 2010 (170-180 nests). Complete coverage of all known breeders was obtained in the 2012 count.

Distribution
The Great Cormorant disappeared as a breeding species in Austria due to a variety of factors including strong human persecution. In the years 2001 and 2003 respectively the Great Cormorant started to breed successfully again in two locations in Austria. In 2012 a third location was detected as a new breeding site. One of the three colonies with breeding cormorants in 2012 is located close to the national borders towards Germany and Switzerland in the west of the country and the two other colonies are located at the borders towards Slovakia and Hungary in the east of the country (Fig. 1.1).

The majority of cormorants were breeding in Droesing, in the north-eastern part of the state Lower Austria. Here cormorants nested within a Grey Heron (Ardea cinerea) colony in floodplain forests along the river March. This river forms the border between Austria and Slovakia. In the most western corner of Austria a small group of breeders were nesting on an island in the Fussacher Bucht at Lake Constance (state Vorarlberg). A third colony was located close to the Hungarian border in the east at Neusiedler See (Lake Neusiedl, state Burgenland).
All three colonies are located within nature protected areas, designated either as a National Park area or Special Protected Areas (SPAs). Almost all breeding cormorants in Austria nest in trees. Only the small number of breeding pairs at Lake Neusiedl build their nests on the ground in reed beds close to Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*) and Great White Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*).

**Colony size**

The three cormorant breeding colonies in Austria contain 5, 11 and 49 occupied nests. The largest colony in Droesing, holding 49 pairs in 2012, was founded in 2003 when birds moved from a former colony in the floodplain area on the Slovakian side of the border to Austrian territory. After the colony was established, numbers fluctuated at around 50-60 pairs between 2006 and 2009 and the colony reached a peak with 121 pairs in 2010. During the following two years there was a strong decline in nests counted. The spring of 2012 was noticeable dry without the usual flooding of the surrounding wetlands. This may have had also negative effects on the food availability of the cormorants, and may have contributed to the decline in colony size (Zuna-Kratky & Pöhacker 2012).
The second colony, holding only 11 successful breeding pairs in 2012, is located in the Fussacher Bucht at Lake Constance (Niederer 2012). This colony was founded in 2001 and was the first record of a cormorant colony in Austria after extinction. The colony held 20 breeding pairs in 2002. Numbers increased to 60-80 pairs between 2003 and 2005 and reached 130-200 pairs in 2008.

A third colony with about five nests was discovered at Neusiedler See in 2012. Here cormorants are breeding within a mixed waterbird colony (see photo) on a large island covered with reed beds in the core area of the National Park (Nemeth & Dvorak 2012).

Human intervention in colonies

Actions which target the breeding cormorants take place in one area, at the Fussacher Bucht, where conflicts with fisheries are intense. Almost since the establishment of the colony at the Fussacher Bucht at Lake Constance, conflicts with commercial fisheries have been an issue. Since 2004 fishermen have carried out various management actions to reduce the size of the breeding colony. Bird protection organizations have raised objections against these activities.

The main aim of these harassment actions is to reduce the number of cormorant breeding pairs to an upper limit of about 30-60 pairs. Actions include tree felling and shooting cormorants during the mating and breeding season to reduce the number of breeding pairs and to prevent the foundation of new nest sites along the lakeshore on Austrian territory. As a consequence of the severe interventions the number of breeding pairs in the Fussacher Bucht colony dropped from about 200 pairs in 2008 to zero in 2011 when the cormorants abandoned the colony. In the following year (2012) a small group of 11 successful breeders built nests in trees in a different place on the same islet. No disturbance or management is taking place in the other two breeding colonies in Austria.
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