2 Status of the breeding population of Great Cormorants in Belarus in 2012

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National summary

In 2012 the breeding population of Great Cormorants (Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis) in Belarus was estimated at 3,250 occupied nests. This is an increase of ca. 20% compared to 2005. Current estimates are based on almost full coverage in the 2012 count, where the majority of breeders were surveyed in known breeding areas. During the census 2,314 occupied nests (1,849-2,914 nests) were recorded in 20 colonies. Of these 20 colonies 14 were counted in the breeding season in 2012 and information about another five colonies was obtained from local people or during field investigations that took place after the end of the breeding season. For the long-living colony in the Chernobyl zone, we used data on breeding numbers collected in 2011. It was not possible to obtain complete coverage in 2012 as breeding took place in areas which were difficult to investigate and as well as within the Chernobyl zone.
**Distribution**

Cormorants are widely distributed across Belarus with breeding taking place in five out of the six provinces (Fig. 2.1). Over one third (37%) of the population was breeding in the south-eastern province of Homel (865 nests, four colonies). Both the central Minsk and the northern Vitebsk province contained approximately one quarter (25%) of breeders (Minsk 574 nests, four colonies; Vitebsk 580 nests, four colonies). The remaining breeders were found in the south-western Brest province (290 nests, 4 colonies) and the western province of Hrodna (5 nests, one colony) (Fig. 2.2).

Cormorants in Belarus bred exclusively in trees and shrubs, with more than half of all nests located above 5 m. The majority of cormorants bred on lakes and reservoirs (51%) and river floodplains (47%). A total of nine colonies (1,004 nests) were located on lakes with an area of more than 100 ha, while three colonies (180 nests) were located on smaller lakes. Cormorants nested in floodplains in three areas (750 nests in two colonies at Dnieper, 315 nests in three colonies at Pripyat, and 5 nests in a colony at Neman). A small percentage of breeders was found breeding at a fish farm (15 nests) and on a flooded bog after peat extraction (45 nests).

![Figure 2.1. Distribution and size of breeding colonies of Great Cormorants in Belarus in 2012. Source: I. Samusenko, Institute of Zoology, NASB, Belarus.](image-url)
Colony size

In 2012, the cormorant population in Belarus bred in 20 colonies. The largest colony contained over a quarter of the population (26%, 600 pairs) and was located in Dnieper river floodplain near the mouth of the river Sozh in the southeastern province of Homel. Of the remaining 19 colonies, six colonies contained between 101 and 300 nests, four contained 51-100 nests and there were nine small colonies with less than 50 nests (Fig. 2.3). More than half of the breeding population (51%) was found in colonies with between 101 and 300 nests (Fig. 2.4).

Human actions in colonies and other factors

Cormorants are considered game birds in Belarus and it is included in the list of so-called ‘undesirable animal species’ in the current edition of the Law on hunting management and hunting. Therefore regulation of cormorant
numbers is carried out according to hunting legislation. Hunters are allowed to eliminate such undesirable animals without special permission if they appear at their hunting grounds in the open season, and they can use any legal means of hunting allowed at that time of the year. During periods of the year when no hunting is allowed, a special license for specific hunting on undesirable animals can be obtained.

At fish farms, special cormorant elimination programs are implemented where the Ministry of Nature Resources and Environmental Protection permits shooting of cormorants throughout the year. Fish farm administrations pay a reward for each cormorant eliminated, and this increases the chances of keeping reliable records of the extent of culling. However, the only information about culling collected is the culling at fish farms. In 2011 a total of 9,833 birds were shot at 12 fish farms.

Cormorant management was carried out in 2012 in areas where conflicts with fisheries were intense: on fish ponds, areas with commercial fishing or in the vicinity. The main aims of the management are to reduce cormorant numbers in total, to reduce juvenile production and to avoid successful establishment of new colonies. Human disturbance affects almost all the colonies, but in varying degrees. Evaluating the impact of management actions is not possible as permission to carry out these measures is not required, except when hunters claim reward from fish farms. In general the majority of management actions are not officially registered or publicized. According to our estimates (taking into account the dynamics of known breeding colonies) there has been a significant increase in cormorant culling initiated by fish farms administrations, and the impact has increased in comparison with previous years.

In 2012 management was carried out in total at 11 colonies. This included four colonies in the Vitebsk region, three colonies in the Minsk region and two colonies in both the Brest and Homel regions. Shooting of adult cormorants took place in nine colonies in 2012. In four such colonies there was very intense shooting in spring during the first half or the breeding period, in other five colonies cormorants were shot periodically, and much less intensively. In four colonies in the Vitebsk region mainly cormorant nests were destroyed. In one colony in the Brest region, eggs were removed from nests, while in two colonies in the Brest and Vitebsk region, nestlings were killed. In more than half of all known colonies breeders were scared away from their nests by fishermen, hunters etc.

Illegal actions took place in at least one colony in 2012. At Lukoml lake in the northern province of Vitebsk several dozen juvenile cormorants had upper mandible removed. As a result the juveniles were unable to feed and most of them were caught and culled by local nature conservation inspectorate or slowly died of starvation. This illegal action was investigated by the Ministry of Environment and other governmental authorities. The person responsible for the mistreatment of cormorants has been fined under the law.

Starting from 2012, amendments to the current Law on hunting management and hunting are being discussed. It is expected, that the term “undesirable animal species” will be excluded from the law, and regulation of cormorants will be implemented in two ways: on the territory of the fish farms according to the old practice and using common approaches to regulation of any species, as allowed by the Law on protection of wild animals, when special permission
for a concrete number of animals is issued by Ministry of Environment to individual game managers based on scientific justification and their request.

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References and further information


http://birdwatch.by/sites/default/files/Samusenko%202012.pdf

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