8 Status of the breeding population of Great Cormorants in Estonia in 2012

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**National summary**

In 2012, Estonia had an estimated 13,000 occupied nests of Great Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) in 18 colonies. A total of 12,880 nests were counted during the breeding season. This is a slight underestimate as storms prevented complete counts to take place on two dates. A total of 12,930 nests were recorded in 2011, so there was no change in breeding numbers from 2011 to 2012.

**Distribution**

All colonies except one were found in coastal areas of Estonia. One inland colony was located on Lake Peipsi (Fig. 8.1). The majority of cormorants were breeding on islets of the Gulf of Riga and Gulf of Finland (Fig. 8.2). Together these regions housed 73% of the breeding population. The Moonsund Archipelago was home to 22% of the breeding population. A large percentage (87%) of cormorants breeding in Estonia were nesting on the ground on small islets in 2012.

**Colony size**

In 2012, the cormorants bred in 18 colonies in Estonia. This is 12 colonies less than in 2011. The largest colony housed 2,057 pairs and was located on Kerju islet in the Gulf of Riga. A total of five colonies had more than 1,000 nests in 2012 (Fig. 8.3) and 62% of the breeding population was found in these five colonies (Fig. 8.4). Half of the colonies (nine out of all 18 colonies) had fewer than 500 nests, and these colonies housed 15% of all breeders in Estonia. The four colonies of intermediate size (501-1,000 nests) held 23% of the breeding population.

In 2012, the breeders were in good condition with an average clutch size of 3.65 eggs (in 8,249 nests sampled). In previous years, following harsh winter conditions clutch sizes were 3.00 in 2010 (in 4,045 nests sampled) and 3.27 in 2011 (in 5,794 nests sampled).
Figure 8.1. Distribution and size of breeding colonies of Great Cormorants in Estonia, 2012. Source: Environmental Board, Estonia.

Figure 8.2. Regional distribution of the breeding population of Great Cormorants in Estonia in 2012. Source: Environmental Board, Estonia.
Human intervention in colonies and other factors

Management is carried out in areas where conflicts with fisheries are intense. The main aim of the management is to reduce juvenile production. Oil ing of eggs took place in three colonies (two colonies in the Gulf of Finland and one colony in the Gulf of Riga) in 2012 affecting a total of ca. 2,000 nests. In many cormorant colonies, especially in those at the Gulf of Riga, people have systematically destroyed cormorant nests. This is the main reason for a particularly high mobility of colonies in this region.

There are increasing levels of predation pressure by White-tailed Eagles in cormorant colonies in Estonia. For example, on June 29th 2012, 43 eagles were present in two nearby (0.6 km apart) cormorant colonies in Käina Bay (observation by Leho Aaslaid and Vello Tarning). In Estonia, the number of White-tailed Eagle breeding pairs is estimated at 220-250 and the total numbers (breeders and non-breeders together) at 900-1,250 individuals.

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Figure 8.3. Size distribution of Great Cormorant colonies in Estonia in 2012. Source: Environmental Board, Estonia.

Figure 8.4. Distribution (%) of the total breeding population of Great Cormorants in relation to colony size in Estonia in 2012. Source: Environmental Board, Estonia.
White-tailed Eagles are common visitors in Great Cormorant colonies in Estonia. Tondirahu colony, June 2009. Photo: Arne Ader.

In Estonia Great Cormorants prefer to breed on small marine islets. Tondirahu colony, June 2009. Photo: Arne Ader.

References and further information


Available in Estonian

Available in English
http://www.eoy.ee/hirundo/English/sisukorrad/2012_1/Ojaste_25_1.pdf