

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*

The Pelagic is the least numerous and least widespread of San Diego County's three cormorants, easily overlooked among the Brandt's Cormorants that are always more abundant in its habitat. The Pelagic Cormorant has a close association with rocky shorelines, as it roosts on exposed rocks and forages primarily over submerged rocks. In San Diego County it is primarily a winter visitor, though occasional birds occur in summer and suggest the possibility of nesting at La Jolla or Point Loma.

Winter: In San Diego County, the Pelagic Cormorant occurs primarily along the coast from Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) south to Point Loma (S7). It is generally

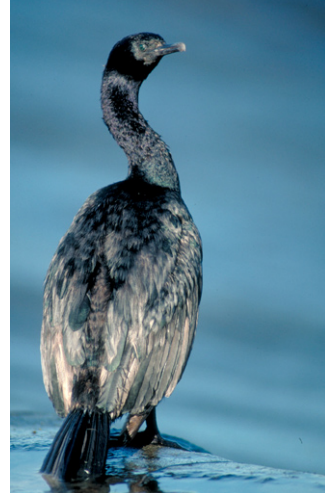
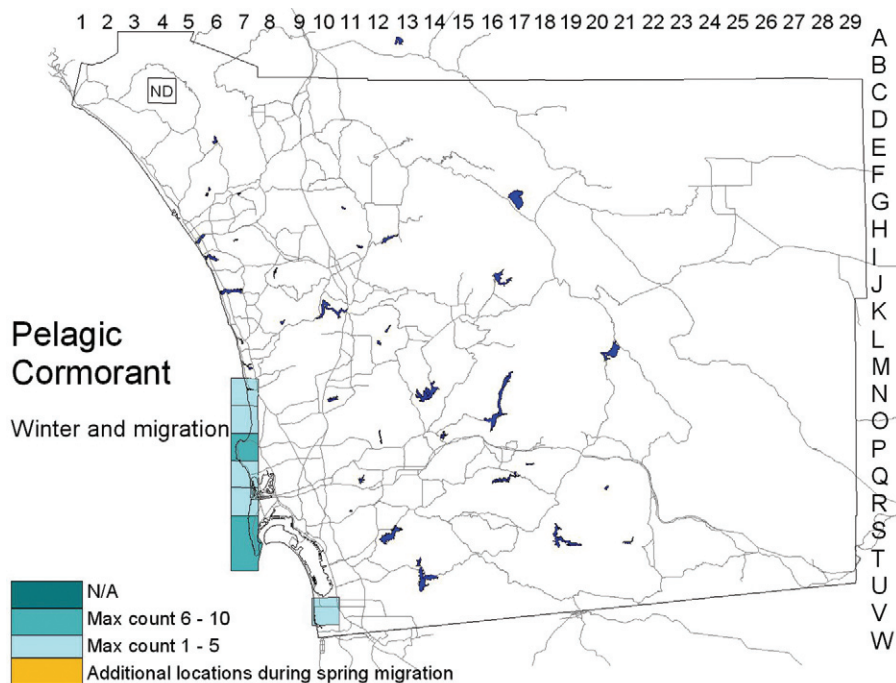


Photo by Anthony Mercieca



1997 to 2001 our only record later than 1 April was of one at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 3 June 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg). During their surveys of north San Diego Bay in 1993, Mock et al. (1994) recorded the species in every month of the year except November, but only a single individual in June and July.

Breeding distribution: The Pelagic Cormorant is not confirmed to nest in San Diego County, but nesting is possible. From about 1985 to 1990 M. F. Platter-Rieger noted some Pelagic Cormorants with apparently nesting Brandt's Cormorants on the steep slopes of Point Loma north of the sewage-treatment plant. On 29 June 2003, M. Sadowski noted five to nine coming and going from the

cliffs at La Jolla Caves. On 6 July, he surveyed the cliffs from a kayak and counted six Pelagic Cormorants, but they were not associated with any nests.

San Diego County lies near the southern tip of the Pelagic Cormorant's breeding range. Los Coronados Islands were the southernmost known breeding locality until 2000, when Palacios and Mellink (2000) reported two pairs nesting on Isla Todos Santos off Ensenada.

Conservation: No trend in Pelagic Cormorant numbers in or near San Diego County is clear, but at the Farallon Islands off San Francisco the population varies greatly and fails to breed when El Niño suppresses the supply of fish (Ainley et al. 1994). Increases in ocean temperature that reduce the food supply and have already affected some other birds could result in the Pelagic Cormorant's range retracting north, out of San Diego County.

Taxonomy: Pelagic Cormorants south of southern British Columbia have long been recognized as the subspecies *P. p. resplendens* Audubon, 1838, smaller than the nominate subspecies occurring farther north. The measurements tabulated by Hobson (1997), however, show great overlap, too much for the subspecies to be recognized on the basis of any single measurement.

Migration: The Pelagic Cormorant occurs in San Diego County principally from October through March. From

uncommon; from 1997 to 2002 our highest counts were of 10 at La Jolla (P7) 4 January 1998 (B. C. Moore) and eight at Point Loma 11 February 1999 (C. Rideout). On the San Diego Christmas bird count, where the species is normally found only at Point Loma, totals during the atlas period ranged only from five to nine, but occasional years see larger influxes, yielding counts as high as 120 on 18 December 1982 and 127 on 19 December 1987.

No Pelagic Cormorants were reported from northern San Diego County during the atlas period, but a few occur occasionally at the entrance to the Oceanside harbor (H5). The species was noted on 10 of 27 Oceanside Christmas bird counts 1976–2001 with a maximum of five on 24 December 1994 but none since. Inside San Diego Bay the Pelagic Cormorant is uncommon in the north bay, north of the bridge. Mock et al. (1994) called it fairly common to common there, but in weekly surveys through 1993 their only count of more than seven was of 12 on 7 December. Similar surveys of central San Diego Bay in 1994 yielded only one Pelagic Cormorant (Preston and Mock 1995). There are no records from the south bay or Mission Bay.