

Angling's pet hate

Over the past few decades the cormorant has become a massive problem for fishery managers and anglers as their population expands and fish-stocks dwindle. **ANDREW GRIFFITHS** investigates the problems and explores the routes to a solution, both in UK and abroad

The Riddell family has run fisheries in Cumbria for 14 years. In 2014, they took on Leighton Reservoir in North Yorkshire. It was the following year when they realised they had a problem.

"We stocked a number of thousands of fish in early February," Ian Riddell remembers. "At the end of February [we] found bodies in all the back-waters. They had obviously been killed by cormorants because the heads were partly digested. They regurgitate the fish if they can't swallow it. Two pound plus fish, they can't manage.

"But I've seen them swallow pound and a half fish no bother," he says.

Disappearance

David Southall is an angler well known to readers of *FF&FT*. He has fished Driffield Beck in the Yorkshire Wolds all his life.

"In the '60s and early '70s, I'd never seen an inland cormorant," says Southall. "You could go to some of the big pools on Driffield Beck and see shoal of 100 plus grayling. Now, in the two miles of the Preservation water that I fish regularly, if I see two grayling, it has been a good day."

"In 2010 we had a flock of over 300 cormorants, and they were here right through the winter. It virtually wiped out the grayling. Now I catch a handful a year, but nearly all of them are over 2 ½ lb," he says.

Riddell's cormorants arrive at Leighton Reservoir in September.



The cormorant is throwing an ever-growing shadow over UK inland fisheries.

Photo: Bigstock/RudiErnst

Between 40 and 60 of them. Some will take fish from his trout farm, then fly further downstream and "plunder" the river Ure. Others will remain and feed at the reservoir all day.

Southall's raid his river from a roost on a nearby stillwater. There are clubs on the river which stock heavily. "They are easy meat", says Southall, "They are basically putting food on the bird table, so the locally breeding cormorants always have a successful breeding season," he says.

These will be familiar tales to many anglers, the cormorant is the 'bete noire' of the fisheries industry. Its appetite is prodigious: one bird will eat between 400g and 600g of fish a day. Research tells us that fish

between 4cm and 34cm are taken, with almost half being between 10cm and 15cm. Talk to anglers and fishery owners though, and the claims for fish size cormorants will take get ever wilder – the highest I heard was 2lb 10oz!

Serious problem

Cormorants can do some serious damage to a fishery. A Loch Leven study estimated that the bird was taking around 30% of stocked rainbow trout, a study done on the North Esk estimated that the cormorant (ably assisted by goosander and merganser) was responsible for around 30% of migrating smolts, and in a Danish study, 79% of radio-tagged adult grayling were taken by winter-

feeding cormorant, a study which concluded that: "predation from cormorants appears to be at a level that explains the observed collapse of grayling and brown trout populations in many Danish streams."

Cormorants are hitting commercial fisheries hard, and the effects are felt in an industry that is worth over £3.5 billion to the economy.

The reasons for the population explosion of the cormorant in recent decades are complex, and made more so because in the UK we are actually dealing with two sub-species: we have *Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*, which is our native, coastal cliff-nesting bird, and *P carbo sinensis*, the 'continental race', which ranges

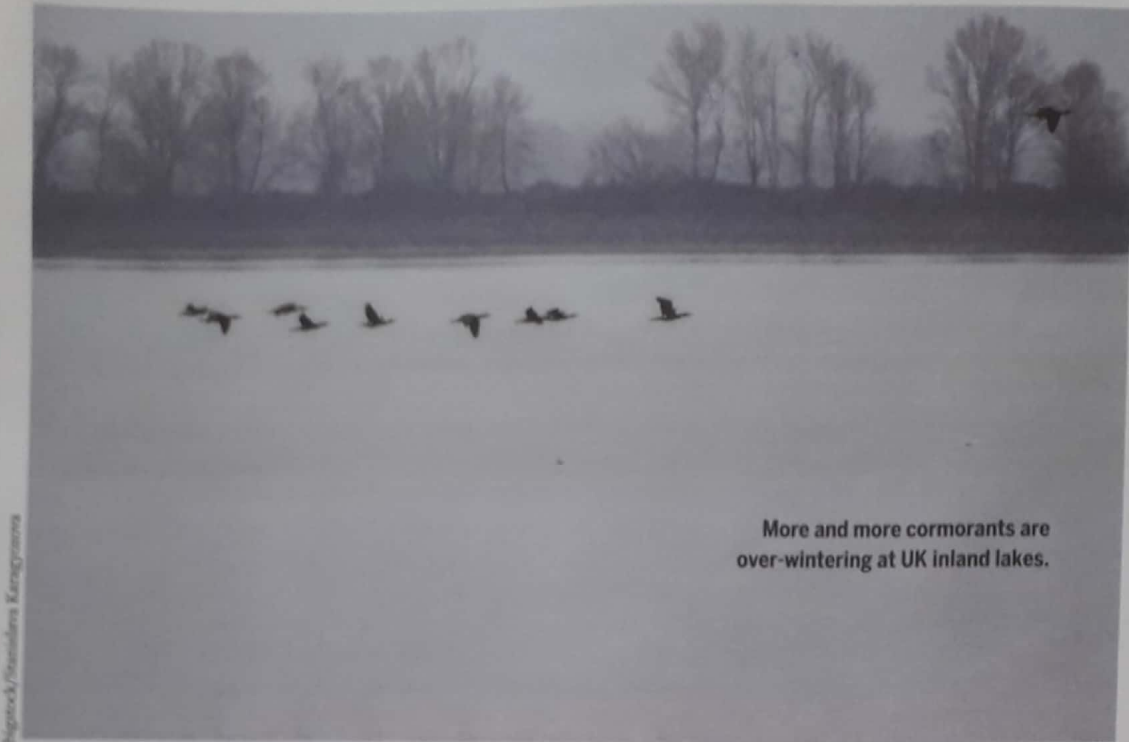


Image: P. Sinclair / K. Kinnear

More and more cormorants are over-wintering at UK inland lakes.

'79% OF RADIO-TAGGED ADULT GRAYLING WERE TAKEN BY WINTER-FEEDING CORMORANT'

same time, you shoot one, and the four others don't come back. On the ground we have seen that work."

This is one of those instances where the science and the people on the sharp end of looking after rivers and waterways can end up in conflict. But science isn't saying that shooting to kill should not be a part of the population control tool-kit, just that there is no evidence yet that it has any meaningful effect, but it is acknowledged that more research is needed into the effectiveness of lethal control.

Disturbance

There isn't much that is seen to be effective in protecting fish stocks from cormorants, which is practical for angling. The only method that seems to work is constant human presence and disturbance. The logical conclusion of this is 'smolt shepherding', where migrating salmon are protected as they make their way down the river to sea. Independent academic, Prof Eric McVicar was involved with developing the concept on the North Esk.

"Once you start getting the smolts coming down in number, gas guns will keep the birds away," says Prof McVicar. "And, human presence. If you get people to go out just after first light, before the cormorants and the goosanders move in, you'll keep them off, and this permits a far higher proportion of these juvenile fish to reach the sea."

A simple approach, but it kept six people busy for five weeks over April and May, shooting to scare, no lethal control. But, cautions Prof McVicar: "You would need to have an open season on them to really reduce the numbers. There is no point in my blasting them on the North Esk, if they are just

from western Europe across the whole of the Asian Continent to China and India. The population of our native species has remained constant over the last few decades, but it is the sub-species *P carbo sinensis* that has exploded in numbers across Europe. The European population now stands at its highest level in over 150 years. It has moved into territories which it has never inhabited before - there has been no record of the inland tree-nesting bird in the UK prior to the last few decades.

The situation is further complicated because the two sub-species interbreed. The BTO's 2012 inland breeding bird estimate recorded 2,362 pairs at 48 inland sites, comprising around 18% of the total UK breeding population.

Ribble data

Dr Malcolm Greenhalgh has collated data on cormorant sightings on the Ribble estuary and catchment, using records from the *Lancashire Bird Reports*. In the 1950s, there was one sighting of the bird inland, and in the 1960s two. In the 1970s the numbers began to increase and in 1986 the first sighting of *sinensis* race was noticed. Today, Greenhalgh estimates that there are: "330 cormorants roosting by reservoirs and the rivers in the area east of the M6".

All conservationists and the more sensible practitioners of the

sports of field and stream accept that predators are a necessary and desirable part of a healthy, functioning ecosystem. The problem is that both in our rivers and stillwaters we have created in some cases extremely unhealthy functioning ecosystems: in the case of stillwaters we have stocked too many naive fish in a stark habitat that accentuates their vulnerability, and in the case of rivers we have degraded the riverine environment to the extent that wild populations have fallen so low that any predation becomes a problem. As Mark Lloyd, now CEO of the Rivers Trust puts it: "Our rivers are in such poor condition that the productivity of our fisheries is so low that predation is a problem."

While fishing in the wilds of Russia recently he said he watched a healthy number of goosanders hunting a healthy number of smolts in a river that was not suffering from pollution, over-abstraction, obstacles to migration and the other myriad of problems that seem to beset UK waterways.

"If our rivers were in really good nick, we wouldn't care about seeing predators because it would just be part of a healthy ecosystem," he says.

While you may appreciate the issues are complex, when you see a big, black ugly bird perched on a branch beside your river and about to eat your fish, the temptation is to reach for a gun and shoot one of those more

obvious complexities stone dead.

A licence is needed to shoot cormorant. Natural England currently permits shooting between 2,000 and 3,000 cormorant a year. Licences are granted either singly, or, since 2014, in the form of an area licence, where a number of fisheries co-operate on the best way to control the bird. There were 19 area-based licenses issued in 2018, and 429 single licences. In the roost of birds David Southall referred to, a licence was issued to kill three birds.

The Angling Trust is campaigning alongside BASC and the farmers groups for reform of the General Licence and to have cormorant added to the list of species that can be killed in numbers judged necessary by the land or waterways manager - after reasonable and practical non-lethal alternatives have been considered.

But there is no evidence that this has reduced the French over-wintering population overall. There, shooting of over-wintering birds began in 1992 and culminated in over 30,000 birds being shot in 2009-10 - 40% of the over-wintering population.

Mark Owen, Head of Fisheries for the Angling Trust, maintains that there is a place for lethal control, which is why he wants to see the bird put on the General Licence.

"When licences are issued, it is a licence to kill and scare," says Owen. "Five birds fly in at the

← going to move onto the South Esk.”

Helping the fish to help themselves by providing them with good and varied habitat, with plenty of places to hide and evade predators, is one of the more effective methods fishery managers can employ to minimise the damage to fish stocks. And on rivers, encourage wild fish rather than stocking – wild fish are more challenging to catch for cormorant as well as for anglers.

Habitat creation

Bob Wellard is Director of Fisheries for The Piscatorial Society, and looks after water on the chalkstreams of Hampshire. He runs a wild trout fishery and favours habitat creation to offer some protection from cormorant predation. “I would sooner my team spent four days a week working on habitat, and one day chasing cormorants,” he says.

Interestingly, even though Wellard accepts the limitations of shooting, he –along with other fishery managers I spoke to – still supports the Angling Trust’s campaign to have cormorant put

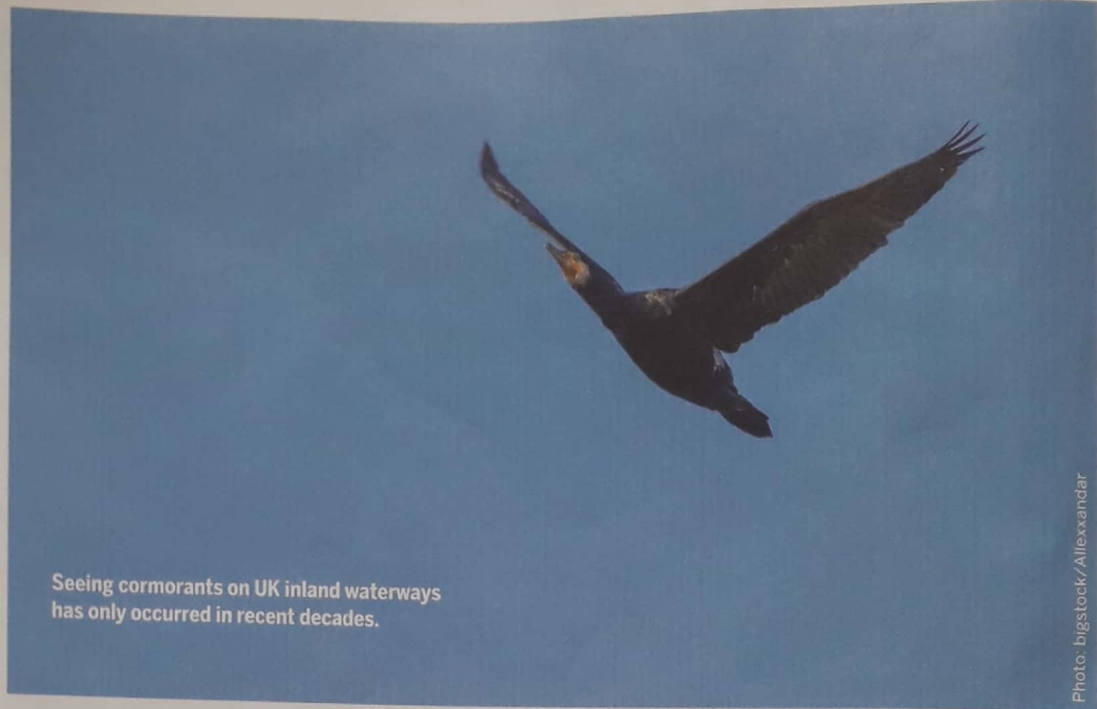
onto the General Licence, presumably because they would prefer the decision to be in their own hands. Wellard’s reasoning is that if cormorant were on the General Licence, then there would be proper reporting.

“There is a bit more transparency needed on both

sides,” he says.

Mark Owen of the Angling Trust wants the flexibility the General Licence could bring, to react to changing numbers coming in winter from their Baltic breeding grounds, which varies according to the severity of the weather.

“We know they are a very robust breeding bird,” says Owen. “We know that under a General Licence, we can be instantly reactive, then if we see population trends starting to go down, and impacting on the conservation status, then you ease up on the shooting, and we know they



Seeing cormorants on UK inland waterways has only occurred in recent decades.


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would recover back to the conservation status.”

He also sees an absurdity in protecting the cormorant at the expense of the endangered salmon, and sea trout, on their smolt runs.

“I have put this argument directly to DEFRA,” says Owen. “We have got two bird species, cormorant and goosander, which are green, [of least conservation concern] and we’ve got salmon which are faced with extinction, what are we going to do about it? I get silence.”

The problem with these sorts of debates is that they always split along the old fault line of ‘unting, shooting and fishing with the farmers alongside on one side, and the conservation organisations and the ‘nouveau’ scientists on the other. Call it the urban-rural divide by another name, it has class at its root, and it is utterly poisonous to conservation debate on this isle.

I spoke to Gareth Cunningham, Head of RSPB’s Nature Policy for its view. He acknowledges that the salmon population is critically low. “My honest view is that shooting more

cormorants is not going to resolve the issues for salmon.

“We need to start looking at how we manage the environment holistically, rather than just trying to find a quick solution.”

New niche?

Cunningham’s concern is that culling cormorants will just create a niche in the system that will be filled by something else – either more cormorants moving in from another area, or another predator. He says that any move towards killing more birds must be evidence based, and done with the full involvement of the statutory agencies and done under licence.

I ask if the evidence suggested more birds needed to be killed, would the RSPB support such a move, despite the likelihood that it would be unpopular with its membership base?

“Look. In a completely different context, the RSPB undertakes lethal control itself,” he says. “We are absolutely clear about that, it is up on our website, we annually report what we control through lethal mechanisms, so we are not

‘ON RIVERS, ENCOURAGE WILD FISH RATHER THAN STOCKING’

opposed to lethal control. But it has to be for sound scientific reasons, and it has to be for conservation purposes.”

Cunningham’s point is that we shouldn’t be thinking about managing the river for fish, or for birds, or for any single species, but for the river as a whole, removing weirs as part of a flood alleviation policy, that if we tackle habitat and diffuse agricultural pollution and all the other problems then the rest should fall into place.

It is hard to view the rise of *P carbo sinensis* populations across Europe in recent decades without seeing it as a problem. Mark Owen of the Angling Trust is looking to tackle it Europe-wide.

“We are working very closely with the European Angling Alliance and our colleagues in the

Baltic, on a robust policy for controlling cormorants,” says Owen.

“Tackling these things at source is best and the source is the Baltic. That is where they are breeding. And they are increasing in numbers. Last year, Sweden for the first time allowed lethal control of cormorants. Denmark has extensively controlled eggs by oiling them.”

What is needed is a concerted, co-ordinated pan-European effort to tackle what is on just a second glance clearly a complex problem. But this at a time when the individual countries have never looked more fragmented in a generation. There is no one simple reason for the cormorant problem, or one simple fix. But it is clear that many of the reasons are of our own making, particularly when it comes to the condition of our rivers. It has been a long road of neglect and poor policy decisions that got us here, and it will be a long road getting us back.

Andrew Griffiths lives in the Peak District, Derbyshire writing for both newspapers and magazines.

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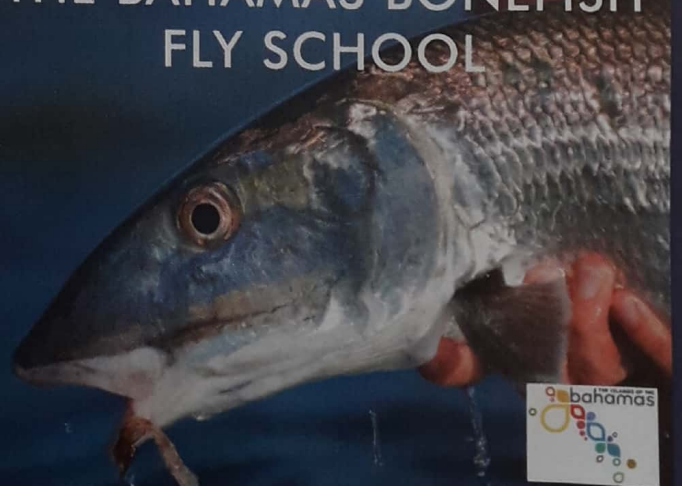
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