

## **Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*)**

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 (BC2)

NMPIF assessment score: 15

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

NAWCP status: Moderate Concern

New Mexico BCRs: 35

Primary breeding habitat(s): Emergent Lakes and Wetlands

Other habitats used: Middle Elevation Riparian

### **Summary of Concern**

The Neotropic Cormorant has a broad distribution extending from southern parts of South America to a northern breeding limit in central New Mexico and north-central Oklahoma. This species was recorded in New Mexico as early as 1854 (Hubbard 1978) with breeding first documented in 1972 (Hundertmark 1974). At times, the species has been relatively common in wetland and open water habitat in the southern parts of the Rio Grande Valley. Since the late 1990's, the New Mexico breeding population has nearly disappeared due primarily to persistent drought and declining water levels in reservoirs, but it began to show slight improvement in 2007.

### **Associated Species**

Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret (BC2), Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron

### **Distribution**

Neotropic Cormorant is resident in lowland areas throughout much of South and Central America, Mexico, the West Indies, and along the Gulf coast of Texas and Louisiana. Inland breeding populations exist in Texas, southern New Mexico, Arizona, and (in 2008) north-central Oklahoma. Birds may appear farther north in the western and central United States during post-breeding dispersal (Telfair and Morrison 1995).

In New Mexico, this species was first noted breeding in 1972 at Elephant Butte Lake (Hundertmark 1974). To date, breeding has been documented only in the Rio Grande Valley in Socorro and Sierra Counties, and nonbreeders have wandered north to Bernalillo, west to the Gila Valley and Hidalgo County, east to the Tularosa Basin and middle and lower Pecos Valley, and northeast to Colfax and Union Counties (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 2006). It was formerly a fairly common resident in the Rio Grande Valley from Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge south (Parmeter et al. 2002), but there was no documentation of nesting anywhere in New Mexico from 1998-2006, probably due to persistent drought and falling water levels; numbers of individuals reported in most key areas since 2000 have been considerably below historic levels (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 2006). In 2007, aerial surveys located five nests in the vicinity of Elephant Butte Lake (Stahlecker 2008).

### Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Across its range, Neotropical Cormorant occurs in a variety of wetland habitats and climatic conditions. This species occupies wetlands in fresh, brackish, or salt water, both in coastal and inland areas. Key habitat requirements include deep water for diving and elevated perches in trees, shrubs, and other structures for nesting, roosting, and drying plumage after feeding (Telfair and Morrison 1995). This species has a relatively prolonged but variable breeding season in New Mexico, with nesting activities initiated in some years as early as March, and occasionally extending into September (S.O. Williams, personal communication). It prefers to nest in small trees, live or dead, emergent or alongside water (Telfair and Morrison 1995). In New Mexico, nesting cormorants require stands of trees or shrubs, in or near water, that are free from human disturbance (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 2006).

### Conservation Status

#### Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	4
THREATS	3
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	3
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	4
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
<b>COMBINED SCORE</b>	<b>15</b>

Neotropic Cormorant is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 species for New Mexico, with a total assessment score of 15. The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (NAWCP) has given the species a high vulnerability score of 4 for a limited non-breeding distribution, which, along with an apparently stable rangewide population trend, places the species into the Moderate Conservation Concern category (Kushlan et al. 2002). The species also receives a 4 from NMPIF for a negative local population trend. Neotropic Cormorant is listed as Threatened by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (2006).

### **Population Size**

NAWCP estimates a United States breeding population of 16,000, most of which occur in Texas and Louisiana. Total species population is unknown. Total population size in New Mexico has not been quantified, but no more than 50 nests of the species have been found in the state in any one year; in some years, no nests are found (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 2006).

### **Population Trend**

Following extensive declines in the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States population of this species increased and new breeding colonies, particularly in inland areas, were established. Numbers increased in New Mexico since the first noted breeding record in 1972, with peak numbers probably occurring in the mid-1990s; as noted earlier, declines have been noted in the state since the late 1990s. NMPIF assigns this species a high score for local population trend, based on expert opinion.

### **Threats**

Declines in the 1960s and 1970s are not well understood; both coastal development and pesticides may have been factors. This species is generally tolerant of most human activities, short of severe disturbance. Local breeding colonies may be threatened by fluctuating water levels which may result in inundation, erosion, or the creation of land bridges to island areas. The extent to which persecution is a factor for this species in New Mexico is unknown, but it is likely that many are shot in Texas under the guise of Double-crested Cormorant control activities.

### **Management Issues and Recommendations**

No special management for Neotropic Cormorant is indicated at this time, beyond a general focus on maintaining the health and integrity of wetland areas and minimizing disturbance to nesting colonies.

## **NMPIF Recommendations**

- Prevent disturbance or degradation of habitat at known breeding sites.

## **Species Conservation Objectives**

### **NMPIF Objectives**

- Determine reasons for recent population declines and assess threats to the species in New Mexico.
- Conduct periodic statewide surveys to monitor breeding population numbers and trends.
- Maintain or increase the existing state population.

## **Sources of Information**

Hubbard, J. P. 1978. Revised checklist of the birds of New Mexico. New Mexico Ornithological Society Publication No. 6. Albuquerque, NM.

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