

Genus PHALACROCORAX, Briss.

GEN. CHAR. *Beak* generally longer than the head, straight, strong, hard, slightly compressed, having the upper mandible terminating in a powerful hook, and furrowed laterally from the base as far as the tip of the lower mandible, with the terminating nail distinct; its tip compressed and truncated; *tomia* of the lower mandible retracted. *Nostrils* basal, concealed. *Face* naked. *Throat* dilatable. *Wings* moderate, the second quill-feather the longest. *Tail* moderate, rounded, and composed of stiff elastic feathers. *Legs* placed far behind, short and strong. *Feet* of four toes, all connected by a membrane; outer toe the longest, the others gradually shortening to the hind one. *Tarsi* reticulated; the upper part of the toes scutellated.

COMMON CORMORANT.

Phalacrocorax Carbo, Steph.

Le Grand Cormoran.

OUR Plate illustrates this fine although common species in its nuptial dress, a style of plumage which it does not possess in a perfect state above one month out of the twelve, and the peculiarity of which state consists in the narrow white feathers which ornament the sides of the head and neck, together with an occipital crest of long slender black feathers down the back of the neck, and a patch of pure white on the outer side of each thigh. This conspicuous plumage, which is common to both sexes, is assumed about the latter end of February or the beginning of March, the period at which these birds commence the work of nidification, after which the white plumes, together with the white patch on the thighs, gradually disappear, these parts then becoming of a uniform blueish black. This peculiarity of plumage is only found in birds that have attained their third or fourth year, the immature dress up to that period being of a dull brown colour, while the young of the year have the under surface wholly white. These remarkable and contrasted changes have induced the older naturalists to look upon individuals in the various stages of their existence as constituting so many distinct species; but further observation has fully proved their identity, the difference depending upon age and season.

The Common Cormorant is equally and rather numerously distributed along the coasts of the British Islands, often resorting to inland lakes and rivers adjoining the sea, especially such as are not liable to be frozen during winter. They occasionally perch and roost on trees, towers, and rocky projections; and although the summits and ledges of rocks overhanging the sea are the principal and favourite breeding-stations, still it is known to incubate occasionally in trees, and even upon the ground, as is the case in the Farn Islands, and the extensive reed-beds in Holland. The nest is usually composed of dried sea-weed, rudely put together, and often of a considerable thickness; the eggs, generally three in number, are of a greenish white, covered with a chalky coating, and extremely small compared with the size of the bird.

In swimming, the body of the Cormorant is nearly all emersed below the surface of the water, the tail serving as a very effectual rudder, by means of which it is able either to dive or turn in the most rapid and dexterous manner.

Its food, as may naturally be supposed from its powers and structure, consists almost wholly of fish, which it takes by chasing beneath the surface, the dilatability of its throat enabling it to secure and swallow fish of comparatively large dimensions; and we may easily conceive that the quantity it devours and the destruction it occasions in the shoals at various seasons of the year must be enormous, and injurious to the interests of the fishermen. Its distribution over Europe is in the same ratio as in the British Isles, and it is even more abundant on the rocky coasts of the north.

The plumage of spring:—On the back of the head are long plumes, which form a crest of slender feathers of a deep glossy green; on the throat extends a collar of pure white; on the top of the head, and on a great part of the neck and on the thighs, are long silky plumes of pure white; the feathers of the back and wings are of an ashy brown, bronzed in the middle with a broad edging of glossy greenish black; quills and tail-feathers black, which is the general colour of the under surface; beak dull white, clouded and transversely rayed with black; naked skin of the face greenish yellow; irides bright green; tarsi black.

In winter the top of the head, the neck, and thighs entirely lose the white plumes of spring, and are of the greenish black of the rest of the under surface.

The young have the top of the head and upper surface deep brown, with greenish reflections; the whole of the under surface white, more or less clouded with brown according to age.

Our Plate represents an adult male in the spring plumage, and a young bird of the year, three fourths of the natural size.