

## Cormorant

*Phalacrocorax carbo*

Category A

Non-breeding visitor at all times of year.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

The nominate form *P. c. carbo* breeds along coasts of Britain and Ireland, Norway, Iceland, western Greenland and eastern North America. The “continental” form *P. c. sinensis* breeds discontinuously in freshwater habitats and coastally across continental Europe and central Asia to Japan, and in southern Asia. Other forms breed in north-western Africa (*P. c. maroccanus*), tropical Africa (*P. c. lucidus*) and Australia and New Zealand (*P. c. novaehollandiae*). British and Irish populations are non-migratory but show extensive dispersal, with a small proportion crossing the English Channel; mainly wintering coastally but with some inland. Continental populations are mostly migratory and many move as far south as the Mediterranean.



Cormorant at Hythe Ranges (Ian Roberts)

The native British race *P. c. carbo* has declined by about 11% since 1986, with some larger declines in northern Scotland, however the “continental” form *P. c. sinensis* has increased and spread. Historically the Cormorant population in Europe remained low due to persecution but following protective legislation in Denmark and the Netherlands in the 1960s, the European population increased rapidly and continental birds started to extend their wintering range into Britain (BTO no date).

In 1981 an inland tree-nesting colony of *P. c. sinensis* became established in Essex, where it increased to 150 pairs by 1986, and this form spread rapidly thereafter across England, with over 1,300 pairs at 35 colonies by 2002, whilst by 2012 it was present at 89 inland sites (JNCC 2021; BTO).

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is an increasing visitor at all times of the year, commonest in winter, and a recently breeding established breeding species.

The Cormorant was included in Knight and Tolputt’s “List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood” (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here, however it would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) stated that “Cormorants are found at sea along the south coast of Kent throughout the winter months, but are seldom observed very close inshore”.

Ticehurst stated that they had on occasion wandered inland and cited just two instances, one of which was recounted by Charles Gordon (1871) in the Zoologist: “last month [October 1870] Baillon’s Crake, three Grey Phalaropes and the Common Cormorant were taken in the Hythe Canal by Mr. F. Young”. Ticehurst also mentioned that “those that have been obtained appear to have been for the most part immature birds”, but there were adults in the Dover Museum that “was shot near the coal mine” (the present day site of Samphire Hoe) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1898, whilst another in the Folkestone Museum was “from the same locality”.

Harrison (1953) did not consider it to have been particularly regular in the county and provide details of many of the individual records, including a party of eight seen in the East Wear Bay, Folkestone by Miss A. V. Stone on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1936, however by the 1940s it had reached a level of some “abundance”, which included the first three-figure counts, of up to 200 birds, whilst there was even an isolated instance of unsuccessful nesting at Stodmarsh in 1947.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) found it to be reasonably common in the county, giving an average wintering population of around 300 birds, with a peak count of 140 in the mid-1960s.



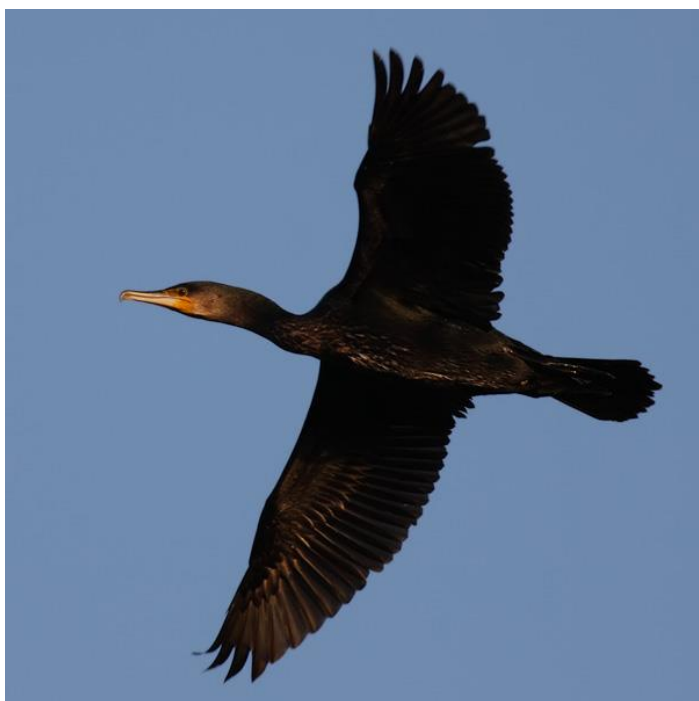
Cormorant at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



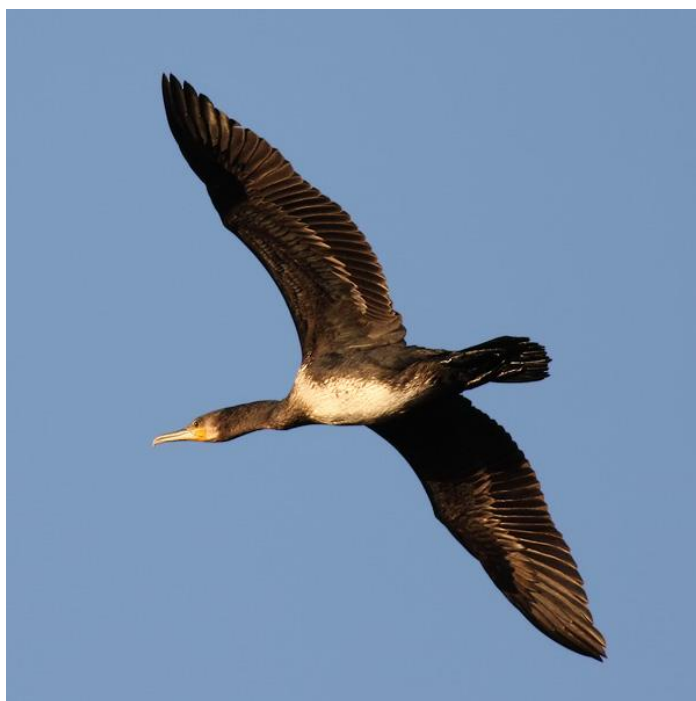
Cormorant at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Roger Norman encountered "single birds occasionally during seawatches in April and between August and November" at Hythe Ranges in the 1950s, with a larger count of four flying west there on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1957 (Norman 2006). At nearby Nickolls Quarry he noted singles on just ten dates between 1950 and early 1957, but the 1957/58 winter produced regular sightings between October and May, with a peak of six present in January 1958 (Norman 2007).

There were few reports in the 1960s and 1970s, presumably at least in part to a lack of coverage, however six were seen at Folkestone on the latter part of 1968 and there were up to eight at "West Hythe" (perhaps referring to Nickolls Quarry) between January and April 1973 and up to six there in November 1976. Dave Weaver recorded up to three on occasion at Nickolls Quarry between 1979 and 1981, whilst R & S Philpott considered it to be "regular" there between 1984 and 1989, and Neil Frampton "frequently encountered single birds fishing on the canal" between the Aldergate Bridge and Hythe from September through to April in the early 1980s.



Cormorant at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Cormorant at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

There was an exceptional count, by previous standards, of 39 flying west past Copt Point on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1984 and it has been noted annually since 1987.



Regular seawatching from Mill Point in the late 1980s produced counts of 30 flying west on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1988, 106 flying west there on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1989, 112 flying west there on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1989 and 82 flying west there on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1989, whilst at least 100 flew east over Folkestone town on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1992, but there were no further three-figure counts between 1990 and 2014 despite systematic coverage.

At Nickolls Quarry it has recorded regularly from 1990 and present in all months, though mostly absent in June and July. Numbers have typically been in single figures but there were peaks of 24 in December 1990 and 20 in January 1997, whilst 23 flew north-east over the site on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2000 and 31 flew north-west on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

### Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Cormorant by tetrad, with records in 28 tetrads (90%).

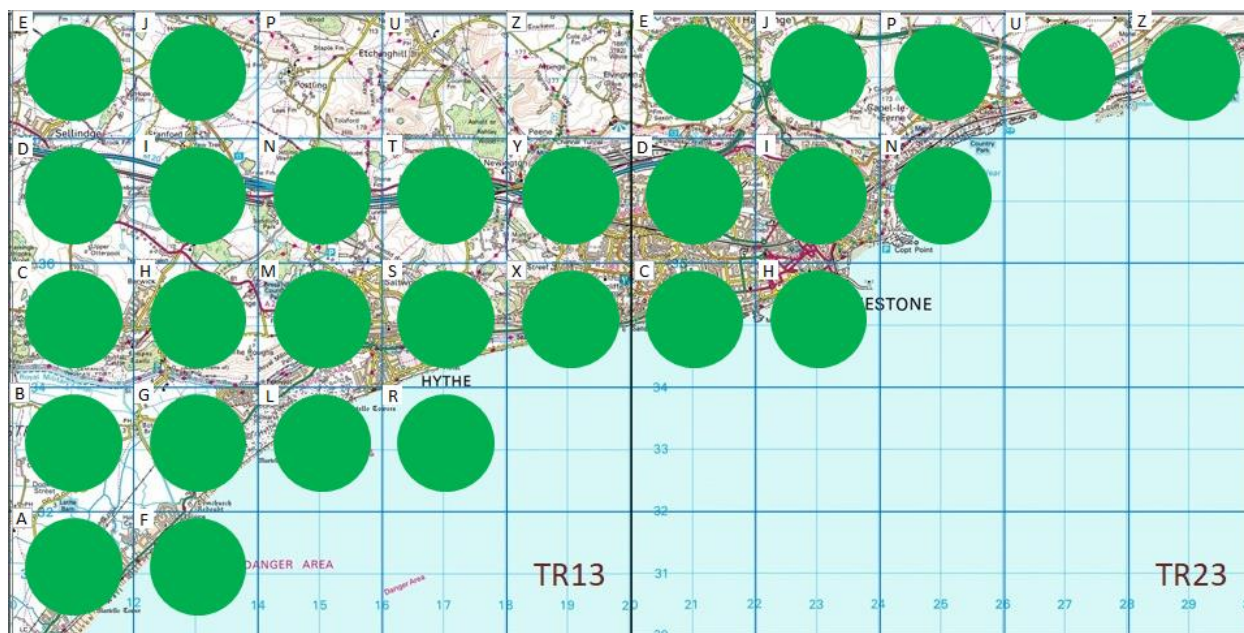
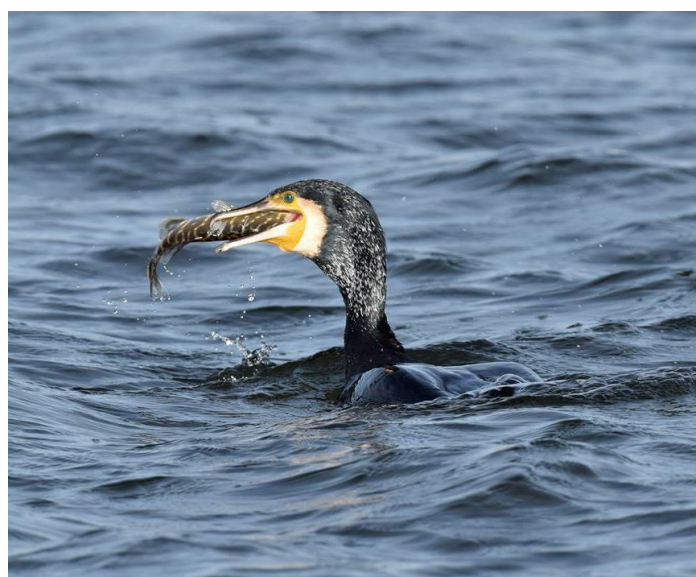


Figure 1: Distribution of all Cormorant records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The first modern breeding attempt in the county was made in 1991 but it did not become firmly established until 1994, when 12 pairs bred at Stodmarsh and 20 at Dungeness (Clements *et al*, 2015). The current Kent population comprises about 20 pairs at Stodmarsh and around 100 pairs at Dungeness, with a few pairs at three other sites (Aylesford, Bough Beech and Cliffe Quarries).



Cormorant at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Cormorant at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

There has been a substantial increase in non-breeding numbers in Kent since 2013, when the first four-figure counts were recorded in the Thames in autumn, with an inland winter roost at Stodmarsh exceeding 1,000 birds for the first time in January 2016 and increasing rapidly to around 3,000 by December 2017. Elsewhere in 2017 there were large rises in numbers roosting on sandbars offshore of Sandwich Bay during the winter (with a peak of 2,700 in January) and at the pits at Dungeness (with 1,860 in February and 3,000 in November).

Locally the first three-figure counts since 1992 occurred in 2015, when 132 flew east past Samphire Hoe on the 7<sup>th</sup> February, whilst 167 flew east past Seabrook on the 9<sup>th</sup> February and a total of 298 were seen off Mill Point on the 11<sup>th</sup> February. In 2016, a total of 225 were seen off Hythe Ranges in late December, before exceptional numbers were noted in early 2017: on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 305 flew east past Folkestone Beach, with 395 east there on the 17<sup>th</sup> January and an exceptional 1,230 flew east there on the 26<sup>th</sup> January.

These easterly movements were noted in the early mornings, suggesting that they involved birds dispersing from the roost at Dungeness to feed, and this was supported by sightings of birds moving back to the west in the afternoon (with a peak of 750 on the 1<sup>st</sup> February). A further record count of 1,471 flying east past Mill Point on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> February, was followed by a record roost count of 1,860 at Dungeness later the same day). Further four-figure counts in early 2017 comprised 1,290 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6<sup>th</sup> February, 1,000 west there the next day and 1,172 east there on the 14<sup>th</sup> February, whilst numbers increased again late in the year, with 1,250 passing Mill Point on the 13<sup>th</sup> December.



Cormorant passing Princes Parade (Ian Roberts)

The record count was exceeded again in early 2018, when 3,445 flew east past Samphire Hoe on the 10<sup>th</sup> January, whilst 2,015 were seen offshore there on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> January (with 1,550 feeding offshore and 465 flying west). There were a number of sightings at this time, particularly from Samphire Hoe, of birds arriving from the east in the morning, suggesting that birds from the roost(s) off Sandwich Bay and/or Stodmarsh were joining up to feed in the Channel (although there is the possibility that these had perhaps overshot the feeding areas and were returning). The roost at Dungeness reached a new peak (and county record) of 6,000 in January 2018, when 4,500 were off Sandwich Bay and 2,600 were at Stodmarsh.

Locally there were further counts in excess of 2,000 on three dates in early 2018: 2,355 off Samphire Hoe on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, a record 3,535 flying east past Seabrook on the 6<sup>th</sup> February and 2,165 off Samphire Hoe on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March, whilst the previous peak was almost doubled later in the year, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, when an incredible 7,000 were seen flying east past Hythe (a new county record).



January 2019 saw between 3,000 and 5,000 passing Hythe on many dates (whilst at Dungeness a new county record of 11,000 was set), whilst December again saw counts of 2,000 off Hythe and Seabrook, with a peak in early 2020 of 2,700 flying east past the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 1<sup>st</sup> January and in December of that year “thousands were moving in both directions” off Hythe on the 24<sup>th</sup> December. Further counts of 3,000 or more have comprised:

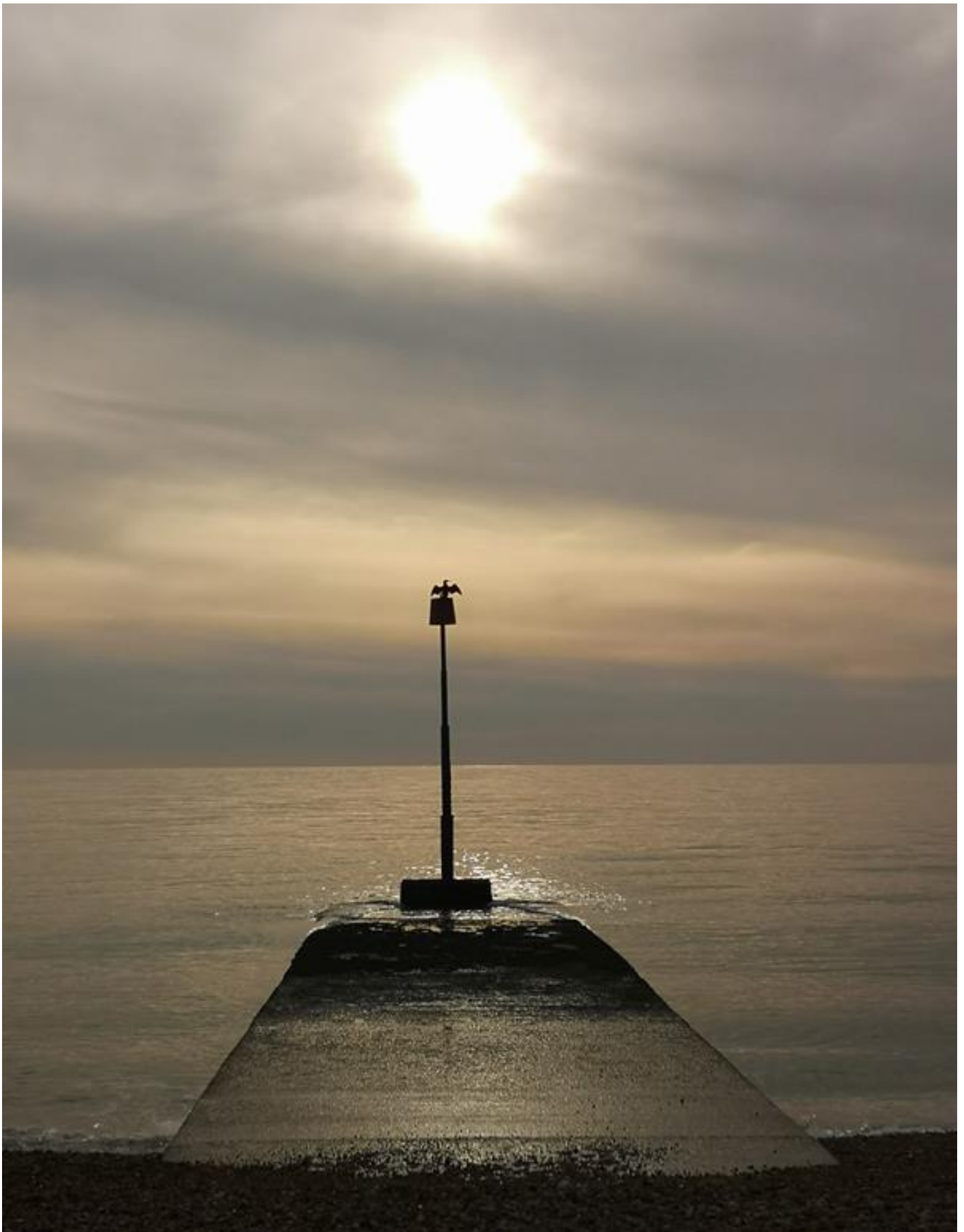
3,150 east past Seabrook on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 2021  
3,300 east past Seabrook on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021  
3,802 east past Seabrook on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021  
5,970 east past Princes Parade on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2022  
6,165 east past Princes Parade on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2022



Cormorants passing Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

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Cormorant at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

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### ***Acknowledgements***

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