

Big greedy British cormorants : where do they come from?

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Some species have expanded their ranges so rapidly that they may pose a threat to the environment. Examples include American mink, greylag geese, and great cormorants. Such expansions may be catalysed by changes in habit that allow species to exploit new niches. Alternatively, the catalyst may be preadaptation to distant niches which can be exploited by migration. We have tested these alternative hypotheses for inland colonies of cormorants in the UK using DNA analysis.

Cormorants are perceived to threaten fish stocks, especially in the Midlands where many recreational fisheries are located and where cormorant colonies have become established in recent years. Did colony formation involve a change in the nesting habits of coastal birds, or the immigration of continental birds that already nested inland? Ringing data were not effective to answer this question due to low returns.

The tree shows that the four inland UK colonies sampled group with inland colonies from continental Europe, not with coastal colonies. We suggest that the immigration of continental cormorants, not a change in nesting habit, has been the catalyst for the expansion of inland colonies in the UK.

DNA typing proves that British inland cormorants come from the Continent

