

recreation must be channeled usefully, a point that I will come back to later.

First, however: I would like to comment on some of the points made by Stuart, who concluded that I had got it wrong and that apathy, rather than cormorants, was angling's number one public enemy. I have some sympathy with the apathy argument, but the whole purpose of my article was to raise the profile of the problem and try to overcome some of the apathy surrounding it, and, as you can see from the response I received, at least it was successful in that respect. Indeed, Stuart himself, although having 'no intention of delving too deeply into the touchy subject' did, in fact, overcome his own apathy by expressing his own opinions and, in doing so, no doubt caused others to think, and me to look further at the situation.

One of the big questions everyone seems to be asking, and which never seems to be satisfactorily answered, by bird men, anglers or whoever, is where do all these birds come from? I suggested the North Sea. Stuart didn't agree, and I'm sure that if we had been having a pint together we would have spent all night debating the issue, instead of looking for ways in which we can legally prevent the birds damaging our fisheries. Now I have changed my opinion, for investigations since the February article have revealed new evidence (to me, anyway) which fits closely my own observations and experience, and that of others, too. It may also offer a solution to the problem. Certainly, the mass evacuation of the North Sea, as I suggested in February, does not appear to be the real cause of our problems, other than having some effect in winter. My enlightenment came just a few days ago, when a contact at MAFF forwarded me a copy of a report, published in 1996, and which was evidently the precursor to the £3 million exercise carried out to study cormorant predation.

The report sets out quite clearly the legal situation surrounding cormorants, goosanders, mergansers and herons, and gives the first clue to what we are seeing and experiencing today. They are, of course, protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside

Act, special protection to the European race of cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*), which was thought to be an endangered species in the Seventies. I apologise if this may sound a bit heavy, but the dates are vital, so please just remember them for a minute, and also the fact that Europe had a 'special' situation.

One of the other most significant statements in the report is that two subspecies of cormorant occur in Europe. The race *Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*, is primarily a marine species, breeding on rocky coasts from north-west France, through sites in the UK, to northern Norway and the White Sea. Quite distinct from this is the race *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*, which inhabits mainly freshwater and nests in trees and, unlike its cousin, is concentrated in the Western Baltic and Central Europe eastwards to China and Japan. In addition, the report quotes a survey carried out in 1977, which shows the distribution of the two types to be clearly separate and demonstrates that UK populations, as anglers have consistently claimed, lived at that time on the coast and not inland. In case anyone missed the point, let me repeat. In 1977, we had two separate species of cormorant, our own seaside bird in the UK, and a foreign freshwater species in Europe, which lived inland. Unfortunately, although the European bird is a little smaller, the two types are almost indistinguishable to the eye, and so we mere anglers would be unable to tell the difference. After all, a cormorant is a cormorant, isn't it?

The big change for both species of cormorants came in 1979/81, when their numbers began to rise steeply both in the UK and across Europe. Now let's forget the silly arguments about commercial fisheries, exploiting new resources, etc, etc, being instrumental in increasing cormorant numbers, quite simply their numbers increased, as they were supposed to do, because of the protection afforded by the European Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act, ie the birds were no longer being persecuted! And did their numbers increase (one could present a similar case perhaps for magpies which now frequent our

Netherlands the number by 10 per cent increased in number by 10 per cent from 1978 to 1992, in Denmark it was 24 per cent and in Germany 30 per cent. In Sweden, the number of breeding pairs rose from less than 1,000 to more than 8,000, in the then East Germany from less than 1,000 to 7,000 and, in Poland, from 1,000 to 8,000.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the numbers rose from almost zero to 7,000 pairs!

In the UK, the situation was very similar, with numbers at wintering sites increasing from 12 to 25 per cent, the latter at gravel pits. And this increase in numbers inland was attributed by the report to, in part at least, the immigration of the European freshwater species!

Now doesn't this give a new and more accurate perspective of the situation we now see today. Here we have a species of cormorant, which was not native to the UK, but was thought to be endangered in Europe, increasing in numbers dramatically, to such an extent that even back in 1995 there were 150,000 breeding pairs around, which is now setting up home in the UK. I'm the first to admit that all of a sudden, arguments that our own cormorant, which eats sea fish and nests on cliffs, has taken to a diet of roach and the like and begun nesting in trees, seem a little hollow. More likely that their foreign cousins are doing the dirty on them, and because we can't tell the difference, letting them take the blame. Of course, one might ask, with possibly many more than 150,000 pairs counted in 1996 around today, just when a species is deemed not to be endangered and when it's protection might cease? Perhaps someone, anyone, might care to comment.

With little doubt that there are now thousands of European birds in the UK, it would be interesting to hear MAFF's view with regard to this foreign interloper. If MAFF is to be consistent with their strongly held and publicised views on the importation of other foreign species, for one, would certainly be interested to hear. For example, if I wanted to put a catfish in my pond, even if it was covered by the relevant health certificates, I would

whereby ordinary anglers can do their bit and collect signatures, and which can be presented to the Government, asking for the European cormorant to be taken off the UK protected species list, with the aim, as in other cases, of protecting the fauna of the UK, and also to pay damages to those fisheries affected by them.

Let me make two more points before closing.

The first concerns the shooting of two goosanders at, presumably, Treeton Dyke. While no-one can condone such an action, I must offer a word of caution about these birds, too. Since the Seventies, goosanders have extended their distribution southwards from Scotland, where they are reported to eat fry parr and smolts at the rate of 1lb/day and are, therefore, perhaps not as rare a visitor today as we might expect. I know of a number on the Rother and regularly see up to 10 birds on the Don at various locations. I have also watched them corral fish, just like cormorants do, leaving those they don't eat, injured and dying.

As to comments with regard to anglers advocating killing grebes and herons and the like, this is simply not the case, and it is foolish to suggest it is. No-one that I have ever spoken to has suggested such action. In fact, far from it, herons and grebes are regarded the same as coots, waterhens, kingfishers and swans. These birds are an accepted part of the natural aquatic environment and, as such, add to the pleasure of angling. The same cannot be said of cormorants.

However, since the subject of herons has been broached, I will quote from a letter I received from MAFF, when I applied for permission to cull cormorants. It says: "You are reminded that herons are also fish-eating birds and their presence (which we, at our club encourage) at your fishery is likely to be having some effect on fish stocks. You are, therefore, advised to seriously consider methods to deter them also." In short, the poor herons have to suffer to negate the effects of the cormorants!

Is this what the Wildlife and Countryside Act sought to achieve?