

# Unusual feeding behaviour by Little Cormorant

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## Introduction & observation

Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*) is found in lakes, reservoirs, lagoons and tidal creeks (Ali 1996). It is a common resident in Gujarat and seen in almost all parts of the state (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). However, there are no sightings or studies reporting Little Cormorant foraging in strong water current. No studies show cormorants (*Phalacrocorax* sp.) foraging in strong inland water currents, downstream of overflowing dams. I report here an instance of Little Cormorants feeding in strong water current downstream of an overflowing dam near Rajkot.

On 11 August 2007 at 18:30 hrs., I visited the irrigation dam Nyari-I (21° 14' N, 70° 42' E), near Rajkot. It was full and overflowing due to heavy rain upstream. The fishes were washed downstream of the ungated dam-wall in the heavy current and were trying to move against the water current. In doing so, they were swimming near the surface and sometimes jumped out of the water. Some of the fishes near the dam-wall were jumping over the dam-wall and falling in the water again. The fishes in inland waters tend to move upstream against the water current. Many fishes move upstream in a strategy of breeding in which the fish breed upstream, where ample food is available when the eggs hatch. Thus, when dams are overflowing, we frequently see fishes swimming or jumping in these waters.

Due to the heavy rain, the water level had reached approximately 1.5 mts over the dam. Downstream from the dam, at one place, the river bank was curved in such a way that the water was swirling at that point. The water level here was suitable for birds like Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*), Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) and Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), which were observed foraging in this area. However, at other places, the water current was very strong. Five Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*), 14 Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*), and a Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) remained scattered on the bank and were trying to catch fish, swimming on the surface or jumping in the air, which is known as aerial feeding. Aerial feeding behaviour has been observed in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur earlier (Sivasubramanian 1988); Intermediate Egret (*Egretta intermedia*), Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) have been observed feeding on fishes jumping out of flowing waters.

The most interesting observation here was of eight Little Cormorants swimming in the water, against the current, even though the water current was strong. The place where the Little Cormorants were foraging was rocky, in the middle of the river. Rocks confined and channelized the water towards this place and the distance between these rocks was barely 20 cms. Foraging Little Cormorants swam against the water

and foraged on fishes channelized in this water channel. The area where I observed Little Cormorants feeding was very shallow, less than two feet deep, and the cormorants were visible from a distance.

## Discussion

Diving birds like cormorants have been observed feeding in tidal creeks; Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*), a cormorant species found in the North Pacific, has been reported foraging in moderate water current at intermediate depth; they have been observed foraging in turbulent water in Southeast Alaska and Southern Vancouver Island, Canada (Holm & Burger 2002, Drew *et al.* 2013). However, such feeding behaviour, wherein the Little Cormorant was observed foraging by swimming against strong current in inland water systems has not been noted before.

It is obvious that the energy expended in swimming against strong currents is much more than when the birds forage in the still waters of lakes and ponds. However, it is possible that in this case, the chances of catching fish are much higher and the energetic costs are justified. However, this is a phenomenon which has not been studied in detail before and is largely unknown. But, it can be said that the Little Cormorant can forage in strong water current of overflowing dams.

The overflowing of check-dams and other reservoirs is frequently seen in the monsoon season in Gujarat. Further observations of such type of feeding behaviour, if seen in other avian species, need to be collected and a proper study is required.

Because of poor evening light, distance and low resolution mobile camera I could not take pictures of printable quality.

## References

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