



CAPE TRYON EXCURSION

by Tina Brajsa, Charlottetown

The annual excursion to the cormorant nesting cliffs at Cape Tryon was quite an experience. About 20 members of the P.E.I. Natural History Society braved the damp weather on the morning of April 16 to see these birds and their habitat. Previous expeditions to the site necessitated a sticky walk along the wet clay road leading to the cliffs, but this time the road was dry and easily accessible by car. The red sandstone cliffs are home to a colony of cormorants, which were scattered here and there, sometimes in groups of thirty or more. In various stages of nest building, some already had laid eggs. They were surprisingly calm, considering how close we came to them from the cliffs' edge. Two species of cormorants were seen: the Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) (length 30-36 in.) and the Great Cormorant (*P. carbo*), the latter being the more numerous. The Great Cormorant is our largest cormorant, and the only one with a white throat patch. The bill is yellower and heavier than the Double-crested's. During the breeding season, the adult has a white flank patch and the immature bird has a belly whiter than the neck. The Double-crested Cormorant is found on inland lakes and rivers, but is mainly seen along the coast. The throat patch is orange and the crests are seldom visible. Immature birds are white on the breast and dark on the belly. Cormorants thrive on fish and also crustaceans, diving from the surface and then swimming underwater to foray. We spotted several cormorants bringing fish to the nesting sites. Nesting birds incubate three or four blue eggs on a mound of sticks and seaweed placed on a cliff, a rock, or in a tree.

Even seen through the fog and mist, the cliffs full of cormorants were very impressive. The sheer drop from the top of the cliffs is at least 100 to 110 feet in places, with ice cakes floating ominously at their base. It has been suggested by Geoff Hogan that the light coloured "manure" deposits on the cliff face would serve to guide the birds to "zero-in" on the cliffs while landing in darkness or fog.

An unexpected highlight of our visit to Cape Tryon was our encounter with a fox den and its inhabitants. The den, dug out of the red earth, was situated on a grassy knoll at the top of a cliff. Having first seen an adult fox go off in the distance, we then saw a number of baby foxes milling about the entrance of a den. A few toddled back into the den, but Geoff Hogan was able to pick up one for all to see. Quite young, with brown-red fur, the baby fox tried a tiny growl in defence. When everyone had a peek at it and after a few photos were taken, it waddled back into the hole with the others. We also found a dead, uneaten muskrat by the entrance of the den and several skeletons of cormorants, gulls and other small animals nearby on the cliff top. Evidently, the cormorants nesting by the top of the cliffs were very easy prey for the foxes.

As we headed back at the end of our visit, a flock of several hundred Snow Buntings descended out of the fog to feed in a stubble field. Such a large group of them seemed impressive for this time of year.

Next year, we hope that the trip to the cormorant

