

Cormorants no threat

BY GEOFF HOGAN

Cormorants are in the news again. It was only a year ago that the Natural History Society, with support from the Island Nature Trust and the P.E.I. Wildlife Federation, requested to the Provincial government that a feeding study be conducted on the feeding habits of the double-crested cormorant on P.E.I. freshwater ponds.

On the one hand were concerned fishermen worried that the birds were the cause of declining trout catches and on the other were well-documented studies indicating that cormorants are not important trout predators. With preliminary results from the first field season now available fishermen should put their fears to rest. One hundred and eighty-three cormorants were shot on 36 freshwater and estuarine ponds across P.E.I. between May and October 1985, according to Anne Gallant, the University of Acadia graduate biology student conducting the research. Only 90 of these birds had recognizable food in their stomachs amounting collectively to less than 10 pounds of fish. Trout comprised only 2.8 pounds of this, 76% of which were under 6 inches. As small trout suffer from a naturally high mortality rate from a variety of factors many of these fish would never have been available to fishermen in any case. No trout or salmon were recovered from stomach regurgitation samples collected at the breeding colonies. Based upon this evidence, plus the fact that many of the cormorants on fresh water were evidently not there to feed (their stomachs were full of saltwater, non-commercial fish), the current study adds further support to the many earlier studies showing that the cormorants are not a threat to game fish species.

Why are cormorants increasing and what implications does this have? Historically cormorants were very abundant in Atlantic Canada but through persecution by fishermen believing they threatened valuable fish stocks their popula-

tions (both Great and Double-crested cormorants) were nearly wiped out. By 1920 most migratory birds in Canada and the United States received legal protection, including cormorants. Feeding studies in the 1920's and later refuted the misconception that they were harmful to fishermen's interests. Since then their numbers gradually grew so that what we are

