

**Today begins the first of a four-part series on Winter Waterbirds. We'll begin with Primitive Waterbirds, then Waders, followed by Waterfowl and finally, shorebirds.**



Birds that dive underwater tend to be heavier than most, so they generally ride lower in the water. This avian submarine swims down fish and grabs them with their dagger bills. It is a thick, straight beak, and the telltale white spots on the back are still present, so it's the Common Loon. Look for them off the Texas City Dike (west side) or Offat's Bayou.



Smaller than loons but equally primitive divers are grebes, and this species is actually in our waters the entire year. This September bird still has the black throat and bill bar – pied means black and white – which they lose later in the fall. So like the Black-bellied Plover and other species, this Pied-billed Grebe isn't always so "pied-billed."



As the fall wears on the black bar and throat wears off, but their incredibly predatorial & brave habits continue. This Pied-billed Grebe unearths a Watersnake and is attempting to grab its head for the long swallow. Reptiles have a smaller, less-chambered heart, so the stamina belongs to the warm-blooded bird with the four-chambered heart. No match.



Double-crested Cormorants are found over much of North America, and visitors expect to see them when they come to the UTC. However, the common species is this Neotropic Cormorant, more slender & longer-tailed. Also notice the skin-feather border at the back of the gular pouch is angled, an excellent field mark for swimming birds.





This bird has a whitish chest, a good field mark for its species. You can also see the back of the gular pouch has a squared off border, the bird is more stout and the tail, shorter. It therefore must be a Double-crested Cormorant, the winter resident that is coming later in fall than before the climate started changing.



Cormorants eat mostly fish which are fusiform, shaped like the body of an airplane (or it is known as the fuselage). It is easier for them to open their beak and get the hook around the vertical fish than if it was a “tall” fish like a bream. Fish shaped like that are easier to penetrate, though, so Anhingas are normally seen having stabbed one of these.\*

In the interest of scientific accuracy, ***we have no true bream in America.*** They are Old World fish. Ours are sunfish, like stump knockers, fliers, redbreast and so-forth. My good friend Richard Perry would disown me if I didn’t make that clear! :0



This odd bird is obviously a cormorant on account of the hooked beak, and yes, the group also has those nifty green eyes. But what's up with the white "ears" & rear pouch border? Obviously, it's an adult, with the black sheen, and this is what they look like in breeding plumage. Neotropic Cormorants nest in late winter and early spring, and it looks ready!



Even longer & more slender than neotrops are their relatives with the straight, dagger bill. This is the Anhinga, America's representative of the Darter family. They also swim under the surface for fish, but instead of grabbing them, they spear their piscine meals (usually) and have to flip it up into the air to grab the head.





In order to help Anhingas and cormorants swim freely underwater, neither group has the oil glands that swimmers like ducks have. It serves to bead up water and not inundate the plumage to the point waterfowl wouldn't be able to take off quickly. But our black friend here can dry his wings the same as cormorants, making flying much easier. Tail tip: You see why they call them water turkeys?



The hooked beak identifies this as a cormorant, also drying its wings after a nice swim.

Below: All ages of double-crested hang on this ferry breakwater, but this type of place is one of the few habitats you actually see both cormorant species together, like pilings.







All the pelicans which are brown in the World dive for their food out of the air, then sit to swallow their fish before taking to flight. The age of this hefty species is easily identified, as the adults (right) have large amounts of white on the head @ neck, while the immature birds are your basic brown all over. They certainly couldn't get far underwater, as the air pockets in their breast feathers that'll cushion the shock of diving into water that doesn't compress, provides way too much buoyancy to swim below the surface.

Below is a size comparison between DC Cormorants and our two gargantuan pelicans.





Considering how important feathers are to birds, they need to spend time caring for them by preening & cleaning. Very pc? I'd identify this as a small flock of White Pelicans, but there is no such thing as a "small" flock of a bird 55 inches long, a 110 wing span and a weight in North America only exceeded by swans. The Texas City Dike is good for them.

Also – below – they are often seen mudding at Bolivar Flats with their browner cuzzins.





Few things are more impressive than a soaring flock of White Pelican. The black feathers which make up their primaries and secondaries avoid wear due to the pigments, important as the birds' weight is enormous. They are often seen following the Coastline east & west on blue days, often after cool fronts. Other birds like ducks fly on cloudy or rainy days.





Related to pelicans distantly are frigatebirds, a few of which stuck around into late fall, as we had little cool weather this autumn. These white-chested birds are adult females, with immatures having white heads. The all black males aren't common up here, which I find curious. That wicked beak serves them well, whether it's robbing gulls and terns or jelly fish snatching. The latter gives them the nickname "man o' war bird."



Northern Gannets are winter residents offshore, sometimes seen from the beach on calm days. They morph from the brown immature above to white adults, with this subadult below being an old picture I shot at the Dry Tortugas eons ago. Gannets, cold water birds, are closely related to boobies, warm water species, and feed by diving out of the air and grabbing surface fish stunned by their impact. When they hit the surface, it compresses the fish's operculum and stuns it long enough to be grabbed by the bird's wicked beak.





One of the most important tools to scientists in ascertaining avian distribution is washups on the beach. Who knows what might be out there in the Gulf or Atlantic? This is a sulid, either a gannet or booby, and with the salvage permit I possess (must be both State and Federal) I sent it to Dr. Arnold at TAMU. Along with recognizable photos, these form the “proof” behind bird records that paint the picture for avian distribution. The field guides we have – which are pretty darn accurate – are based on the science that Keith and other ornithologists perform, and we owe them a great deal.



An extremely rare bird this far North, but perhaps one that visits offshore more than we know, this apparent Masked Booby was following the Gulf Shoreline maybe 200 yards out on Bolivar Peninsula. I made a Herculean effort to turn around in heavy traffic, speed back along the highway 3-4 miles, exit onto a sand road to the beach and snap a quickie shot in the worst of weather conditions, midday sun and salt spray.

The old order of pelicans, boobies, gannets, cormorants, darters and frigatebirds that we named Pelecaniformes has been split unmercifully, for various reasons. I always loved their commonality of unique totipalmate feet, where the webbing included the hind toe, thus the foot was “totally” webbed. Classification, or taxonomy, is an uncomfortable marriage of morphology, DNA and opinion, and the farther “up” the taxonomic levels from species, the more vague our pronouncement get. But God told us to name all the animals, and we know now it was because He didn’t want to fool with it.

Smart Guy. ;)