

AN INCREASE IN SIGHTINGS OF CORMORANTS *PHALACROCORAX CARBO* IN MALTESE WATERS DURING 1986-1988

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Abstract

The past status of the Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* in Malta is reviewed. The number of winter records has increased in the past years. Although this increase may be attributed to an increase in seabird watching, a similar increase of wintering birds has been recorded elsewhere.

Introduction

The Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* is a scarce annual visitor to the Maltese Islands, mostly from October to February. Cormorants are noted mainly around the coast during moderate to strong winds, but occasionally fly overland. Single birds are noted feeding in the harbours and creeks during the winter months (Sultana & Gauci 1982).

History

The status of the Cormorant in the Maltese Islands has always been rather uncertain. Schembri (1843) noted it to be rather common in former years, while Wright (1864) listed it as not uncommon, but as not very regular. Despott (1917) noted it to be frequent. Gibb (1951) observed a few during the years 1941-45. Roberts (1954) noted it to be frequent in winter, while DeLuca (1969) recorded it in small numbers in winter. Bannerman & Vella Gaffiero (1976) reported it to be annual in small numbers from mid-autumn to late winter. Sultana *et al.* (1975) and Sultana & Gauci (1982) noted it to be a scarce visitor with some 10 records annually. Brichetti (1982) considered the Maltese Islands as unimportant, with regards to the movements of the Cormorant, taking in account the average of 10 records annually. Sultana in van Eerden and Munsterman (1986) estimated a maximum of 25 birds wintering in Maltese waters.

The number of birds which are reported shot along the shores, has been on the increase in recent years with the increase of sea-shooting from very fast sea-crafts. Sultana (1986) gives 15-20 birds shot annually, while Magnin (1986) gives 25-50 birds shot annually.

Observations in Maltese and Central Mediterranean Waters

An increase in numbers of migrating / wintering Cormorants has been locally recorded during the years 1986-88 (Coleiro 1988; 1990). This increase could be partly attributed to an increase in field observations around the coast, especially from October to March. Organised and regular sea-watching outings are producing new data on several sea-bird species previously noted to be rare or scarce in Maltese waters, such as the Gannet *Sula bassana* (Mangion *et al.* 1989).

However, an increase in numbers was also noted in nearby Sicily during the same period (Iapichino 1989, Iapichino & Massa 1989). Previously in Sicily it had been recorded as an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor, on passage being observed in single figures or in parties of up to 15 birds. Overwintering has been recorded regularly since the late seventies and up to 1984 with 30-50 birds counted in January. From 1985 to 1987, 330-425 were counted in January. van Eerden & Munsterman (1986) estimated a total of 700 birds wintering in and around Sicily.

In recent years numbers have also been on the increase in Tunisian waters. Previously it had been

recorded as a scarce or rather scarce winter visitor (Thomsen & Jacobsen 1979). The number of wintering Cormorants in Tunisia is now estimated at 25,000 to 30,000 birds (van Eerden & Munsterman 1986).

Present Situation

During the years 1967–85 an average of 10 birds was being recorded annually. In 1986, the first year of organised sea-bird watching by members of the Malta Ornithological Society, there were no fewer than 26 sightings, totalling 120 individuals, observed in single and double figures. A flock of ca. 40 birds was recorded in October 1986. In the following year, the number of sightings increased to 32 but with a lower total number of birds — 77. In 1988, an increase both in birds and sightings was recorded; 44 sightings produced 166 birds (Fig. 1).

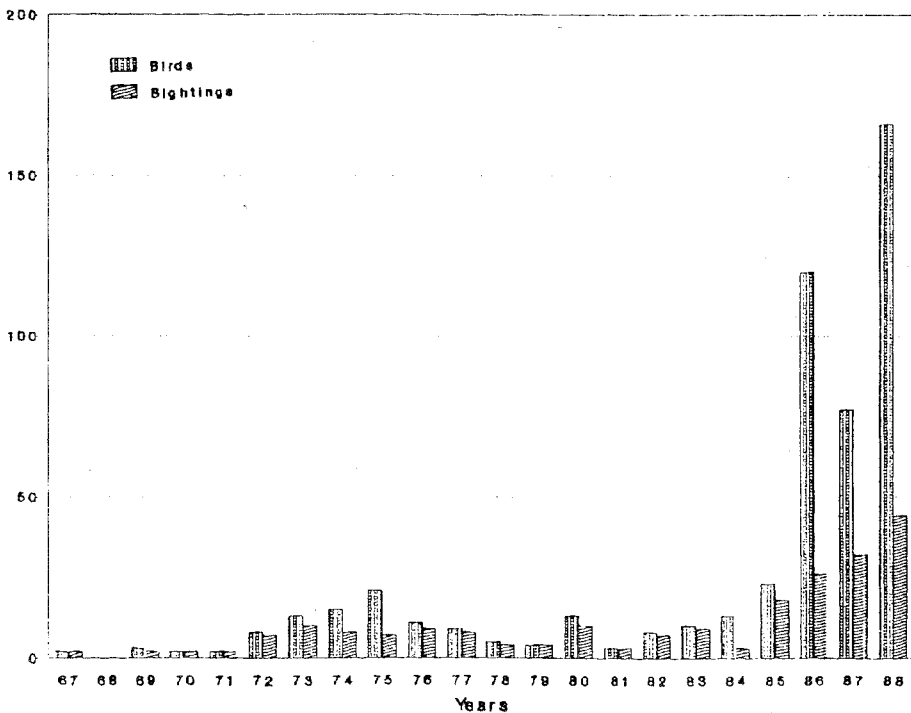


Fig. 1. Annual sightings and number of birds during 1967–88.

November is the month with the highest counts / sightings, normally followed by October, except in 1987 when February produced more birds. Single birds have also been observed in the months of January, February, March, April, May, August, September and December (Table 1).

In 1986 October and November produced the highest number of birds respectively. October had the largest number of sightings, followed by November. In 1987, November was the month with the highest counts and sightings; February produced the second highest monthly count, although there were fewer sightings, followed by the month of October. In the following year November again produced the highest counts and sightings, followed by October and December (Fig. 2).

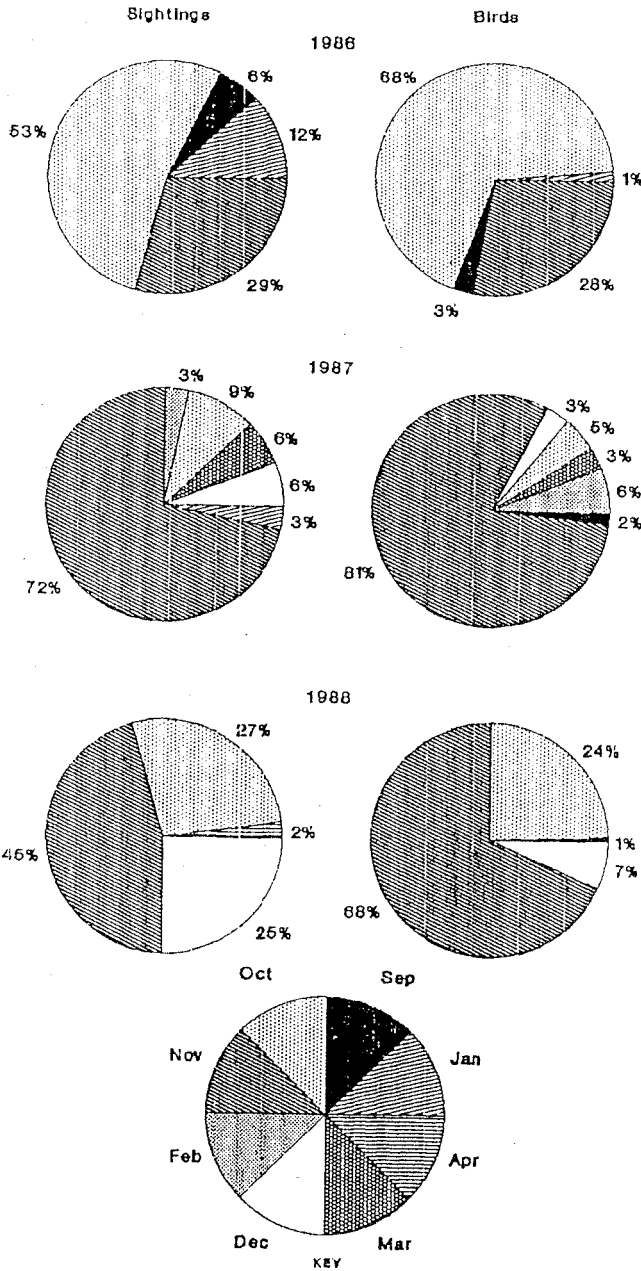


Fig. 2. A monthly analysis of birds and sightings observed in the years 1986-88.

Table 1. A monthly breakdown of sightings and number of birds recorded for the years 1967-1988.

Month	Sightings	(%)	Birds	(%)
January	8	3.7	9	1.7
February	1	0.5	4	0.8
March	3	1.4	3	0.6
April	6	2.8	9	1.7
May	2	0.9	2	0.4
August	1	0.5	1	0.2
September	6	2.8	7	1.3
October	54	25.0	167	31.9
November	104	48.1	288	55.0
December	31	14.3	34	6.4
Total	216	100%	524	100%

Discussion and Conclusion

Sultana & Gauci (1982) report that no adults in breeding plumage were ever recorded. One bird shot off Rinella Pt. (Malta) on 20 March 1990 was in complete breeding plumage (pers. obs.). It may be assumed that an unquantified number of birds flying north in early spring may be adults in complete or partial breeding plumage.

The increase in the number of Cormorants sighted in Maltese waters may be attributed to an increase of sea-bird watching but, on the other hand, a genuine increase in wintering birds in recent years cannot be excluded since a similar increase has been reported elsewhere (van Eerden & Munsterman 1986).

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