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Do you know your cormorants?

6 Feb 2016 | By Nancy Auerbach | [EN](#)



How would you identify this bird*? Read on to learn key identifying field marks. Photograph by Sandra Galliene

How well can you identify cormorants? The experienced birders among us would say very well as four out of five of Australia’s species of cormorant are quite common.

However, to those new to birding, cormorants (or shags as they are sometimes known) can be confusing. Four have an extensive range over much of the continent and their ranges overlap on the mainland. The Black-faced Cormorant is the exception and is much more restricted in range. It is found only along the south coast of the mainland as well as around the coast of Tasmania.

This article is intended to help those newer to birding avoid some common identification mistakes.

The first problem with the cormorants are their names – Pied, Little Pied, Black-faced, Great, and Little Black Cormorants. From those names, it’s simple to assume that a bird can be easily identified by its size, but when out in the field – size is not always easy to gauge. No problem if the birds are seen side by side but really, how often does that happen? If you check your field guide to see how big each species is – you will find that a Pied Cormorant is 66-80cm long and a Little Pied Cormorant is 58-64 cm long. There’s not a huge difference at the lower end of the scale for a “little” Pied (66 cms) and higher end for a “big” Little Pied (64 cms), just 2 centimetres!

The second problem is that three of the five are black and white and two of the five are black, and if you throw the Australasian Darter into the mix (a bird sometimes confused with a cormorant), it is black and white for the female and black for the male.

The third problem is that they are all associated with water bodies and, except for the Black-faced Cormorant which sticks to the coast and has a preference for rocky outcrops, cormorants can turn up anywhere there’s water – in coastal waters, bays, estuaries, rivers, swamps, lakes, reservoirs and dams.

So let’s take a look at each species and see what makes them unique, beginning with the three species of black and white cormorants and for these – it’s all about the face.



Pied Cormorant: Has a long, substantial bill that is described as “horn” coloured or “off white” – it’s never yellow, it’s never dark grey. The other unique facial feature is the skin colour between its eye and bill which is quite yellow in the adults, especially at breeding time. NOT so in the immature. However, these still have the long, pale bill.



Little Pied Cormorant: Has a yellow-sided bill which when compared with the Pied Cormorant is quite “stubby”. The immature also has this feature. The adults have white above the bill, not yellow and not black as for the two other black and white species. However, the immature can have black on its face which reaches down to its eye but NEVER around it as for the Black-faced Cormorant.



Black-faced Cormorant: The black from this bird’s crown comes down onto its face, reaches right around its eye and it also has black on its chin. Its bill is dark grey. The immature has a buff-brown face and its neck has a dirty look not the crisp white of the adult.

Next, let’s look at the two black cormorants and another species sometimes mis-identified as a cormorant:



Great Cormorant: This bird, like the Pied Cormorant, has a substantial bill but this is described as “dark horn”. However, as there are only two almost completely black cormorants, the best feature to distinguish a Great from a Little Black is that the Great has a yellow patch on its face at the gape end of its bill which extends onto its chin. When in breeding plumage this patch is surrounded by white and it also has a white “crescent” shaped mark on its flank.



Little Black Cormorant: Wholly black cormorant with a dark grey bill. When in breeding plumage, the Little Black can appear more bronzed but it is always ALL black.

Australasian Darter: The other bird species that can be confused with the five species of Cormorant. This species is not found in Tasmania, but across the mainland, its range also mirrors that of the four common cormorant species. It can be distinguished from the cormorants by its long snake like neck, pointed not “hooked” yellow bill and long dark tail. Adults birds come in two plumage phases – the male is black with a white, lower facial and upper neck streak and dark chestnut neck, the female is black and white, similar to the black and white cormorants, but also has the white, lower facial and upper neck streak in common with the males. The young begin life pink, then as they age go to white downy chicks and then to grey and white immature birds. All the darters have flesh coloured legs and feet whereas all the cormorants have black legs and feet.



Australasian Darter (Male)



Australasian Darter (Female)

We hope you keep these identification tips in mind when you’re out birdwatching and find a cormorant or two. There’s nothing like that satisfying “Aha!” when you see the identifying field marks on a bird that tell you who they are.

~article by Sandra Galliene, id photographs by Mat Gilfedder

Reference: The Graham Pizzey & Frank Knight Field Guide to the Birds of Australia.

*The featured bird is a Pied Cormorant

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