

Ravens & Cormorants – an image problem?

Forest Ravens

Forest Ravens (*Corvus tasmanicus*) are widely persecuted and are offered no protection under law in Tasmania. For more information on this species, see the Forest Raven Species Sheet.

Ravens & Lambs

Forest Ravens in Tasmania (and ravens and crows on mainland Australia) have been widely persecuted by farmers in the belief that they are a predators of lambs. Ravens are attracted to lambing paddocks in their role as 'sanitation workers'. They clean up the placenta and membranes discarded by ewes after lambs are born and carcasses of lambs that have died.

Research by the CSIRO in the 1960s showed that lambs attacked by ravens were already dead, or were not 'viable' as they had been abandoned by their mothers and were weak or ill. Ravens will, on occasion, 'test' a resting lamb by giving it a peck or two around the tail area. A healthy lamb will get up and run to its mother, and the mother will also defend it. Ravens are, in fact, cleaning up carrion and have been persecuted unnecessarily.

Starvation is one of the most common causes of lamb mortality in Australia. Ravens may be a problem if there has been some mismanagement of the flock, such as under-feeding of pregnant ewes, and inadequate provision of shelter. This can result in large numbers of starving lambs. Ravens will 'finish off' these lambs, which were likely to die anyway because of their weakened condition. Farmers will attract larger numbers of ravens to their property if their lambing is out of sync with that of their neighbours, which may cause a problem for live lambs where there is intense competition for food by the ravens, and lambs are weak.

Twenty percent of lambs born in Australia each year in unsheltered paddocks die. The insistence of farmers to have lambing occur during late winter, rather than well into spring, combined with the lack of shelter, means that a large number of lambs die in wet and windy conditions. Appropriate shelter that provides an effective windbreak, seasonally appropriate lambing, and adequate nutrition for ewes will significantly reduce lamb losses.

It is, in fact, mismanagement that is the real cause of death of lambs in most cases, and it is regrettable that the raven has been made a scapegoat.

Ravens & Crops

Ravens like to dine on fruit crops from time to time, and grains on occasion, which can make them

unpopular with farmers. A typical response is to shoot the offenders. In addition to the cruelty concerns in shooting this fast moving bird, the need for any form of lethal control must be questioned (see the Issues Sheet No. 8 for more information). Many alternatives exist that don't involve killing. Exclusion netting is the best choice for crops likely to sustain high levels of bird damage, with the costs usually recouped quickly with the savings from crop losses. In addition, netting has been found to benefit fruit quality by reducing blemishes, sunburn and wind rub.

Shooting has little impact on the population as a whole and can, in some cases, even increase the amount of damage being done. A bird scared off by shooting will leave a partly eaten piece of fruit, and when returning, will choose another piece. Shooting is also unlikely to be cost effective, and takes no account of the good that birds do on farms. (see Good News about Ravens below)

Using a range of deterrents and scaring techniques, where the pattern constantly changes so that birds don't become familiar with a particular routine, has been shown to be successful.

Good News about Ravens

Forest Ravens are one of a number of species that help out around the farm by consuming large numbers of the pasture-damaging scarab beetle or larvae, the cockchafer beetle and help control other potential pest invertebrates such as worms, millipedes, spiders, beetles, molluscs, caterpillars and grasshoppers. A Tasmanian study found that the weight of pasture cockchafer larvae, which feed on grass roots, could be twenty times the weight of sheep the same paddock could carry! They also offer a waste disposal service, cleaning up human refuse and roadkill, thereby decreasing both the amount of unsightly rubbish and the numbers of fly larvae (which cause flystrike).

What can you do?

-  Ravens and crows are protected species in all states of Australia except for Tasmania and South Australia. That is not to say that permits for their destruction can not be issued in other states, but there is no wholesale slaughter allowed.
-  Educate people to appreciate what an amazing species they are.
-  Encourage people to use non-lethal methods of deterring ravens who may be consuming human crops.
-  Lobby the Tasmanian Government to protect the Forest Raven under the Wildlife Regulations 1999.

Cormorants

Little Pied Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*) and Great Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) are persecuted in Tasmania and are not protected under law. For more information on this species, see the Cormorant Species Sheet.

Cormorants & Fishing

Cormorants come into conflict with humans over fishing rights. They have been unjustly blamed for eating large numbers of species favoured by humans. In Tasmania the Little Pied Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*) and Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) are heavily persecuted by fishermen.

This persecution is largely based on popular opinion rather than scientific fact. Numerous researchers from the early 1900s to 1980s in Australia have shown that the effect of cormorants on fisheries is inconsequential. A European study on the effects of the Great Cormorant on commercial fish stocks in lakes showed no decline in fish takes by humans, despite an increasing cormorant population that had recovered strongly from past persecution.

Whilst cormorant populations fluctuate naturally with available food sources, the human population continues to rise, with each new generation expecting the same fishing rights as the one before. Unfortunately the fish just aren't naturally able to keep up with the increased demand. Fish numbers the world over are suffering, and so are the non-human species that rely on them as a food source.

Cormorants eat a range of fish species, native and non-native, and crustaceans (refer to the Cormorant fact sheet for dietary information). It has been found that the proportion of commercial fish species consumed by cormorants is only a very small percentage of their overall diet. Cormorants feed extensively on introduced species such as common carp and redfin perch, both of which are present in Tasmania and do damage to native fish. So whilst they do consume some species that omnivorous humans favour, they also eat many other species.

Cormorants are thought to play a role in reducing the number of predators of fish eggs and 'fry' (young fish by consuming species such as yabbies, eels and larger predatory fish. They tend to breed in areas where fish lay their eggs as this attracts species which they can feed to their young. Cormorants are more likely to be a problem in fish farms and small dams where the numbers of fish are highly concentrated. However, the Little Pied Cormorant is not regarded as a threat for fish farms on mainland Australia because of its preference for yabbies.

Killing of cormorants is regarded in many circles as an ineffective method of reducing predation at fish farms – a vacuum is created into which more individuals will arrive to fill the gap if the food source is good. The NSW Parks & Wildlife Service consider issuing licences to kill native

What can you do?

- 👤 Lobby the Tasmanian Government to protect these species of cormorants under the Wildlife Regulations 1999.
- 👤 Tell people what you have learned about cormorants – help improve their image.
- 👤 Don't eat fish, then you won't be competing with cormorants and other seabirds for food! See www.fishinghurts.com for information about fishing.

wildlife an 'extreme measure' with the ultimate goal to use non-lethal measures of control only - unlike Tasmania.

Alternatives to Killing Cormorants

Although cormorants do prey on fish in farm dams and fish farms, it is important to ascertain what species they are consuming to see if the problem is real or imagined. If there is a problem, a number of things can be done to reduce their predation. Some alternatives to killing are:

- Site selection is important to consider (for example siting a farm near to breeding colonies makes little sense).
- Ensure a buffer population of crustaceans – they are easier to capture and abundance makes them the prey of choice rather than fish.
- Lower fish stocking rates (150 per hectare in farm dams) minimises chances of cormorants locating the fish from the air.
- Barrenness of many farm dams also means little cover for fish. Providing underwater plants and pieces of wood gives fish somewhere to hide
- Use predator netting or bird scare wire over dams, taking care to ensure it does not impose an entanglement risk to other species.
- Fish are most vulnerable to cormorant predation whilst small, just after stocking. It makes sense to stock when predator numbers are low. Cormorants tend to breed after flooding events, making it possible to predict when numbers of cormorants will be highest.

Protection for Cormorants

Over one hundred years ago people were agitating for the protection of cormorants, complaining that they were unjustly blamed for fish depletion. Now all cormorant species are protected in all states of Australia, except Tasmania. It is time to bring Tasmania in line with the rest of Australia and provide full protection for all species of cormorant.

In Tasmania the Great Cormorant and the Little Pied Cormorant remain unprotected because of the strength of some misinformed quarters of the fishing movement and lethargy on the part of our government. It is time the tables were turned in their favour.