

It's a Cormorant thing! – Part II

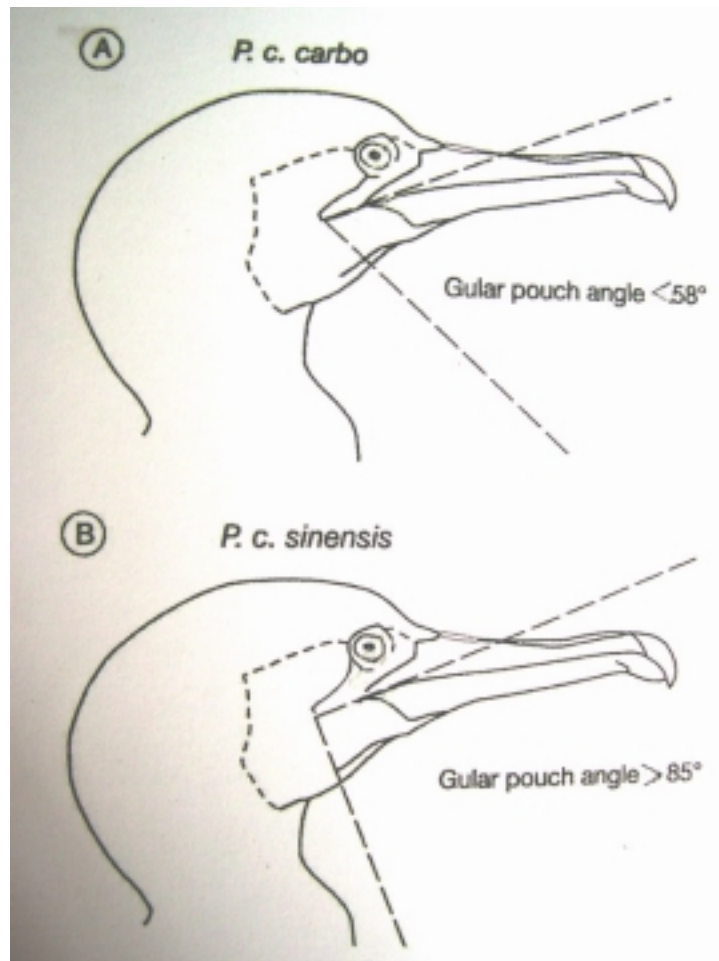
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Phalacrocorax carbo carbo – I finally nail one at Grove Ferry (58 degrees exactly!)

I must start this 2nd instalment with the statement that this piece is not based upon any scientific study or methodology. It is just my own personal overview of the status of these two sub-species, as observed whilst out birding around East Kent.

The superb id paper (Sub-specific Differentiation of Great Cormorants) was published by Newson S E, Hughes B, Russell I C, Ekins G R & Sellers R M (2004) and the main part of this was posted on the C-R Cormorant website. Basically, it called into question some of the previously held criteria for separating *P.c. carbo* and *P.c.sinensis*. The main thrust of the paper revolved around the significance of the angle between the gape line, **not** the beak line, and the edge of the gular pouch. By using this measurement, I had not knowingly seen a Cormorant of the nominate race *P.c.carbo* in the 5 years that I had lived on the Isle of Thanet. I set myself the challenge to find one during the early spring (2006) and, as you can see by the introductory picture, I succeeded.



The poor copy of the original diagram (above) has been doctored slightly (Tipex and a Rotring editing pencil!) to include another small feature that I have noted whilst involved in my quest. It is not significant in itself, but when combined with the “gular pouch angle” does have some relevance – in my limited experience! The point at which the bare skin, above the gape line, joins the eye actually increases the overall impression of the gular pouch angle used as the defining field mark. In *P.c.carbo* this is about halfway below the eye, in *P.c.sinensis* it is towards the rear of the eye.

So where has all this effort led? Well, apart from giving me something to do when not checking through flocks of gulls for coloured rings, it has provided interest when there was no other – spring 2006 was rubbish!

Looking at these fascinating birds has resulted in my concluding that “Sinensis” are indeed the dominant race around the region, but “Carbo” does breed, in small numbers, in the Stour Valley. I don’t, however, think that they winter locally. “Sinensis” Cormorants are predominantly birds of fresh water and habitually tree nesters, “Carbo” are marine birds that have adapted to the inland environment and several Cormorants that I

have seen this year have shown intermediate features of the two races, thus suggesting hybrid/mixed parentage? Two species? – Well Carrion & Hooded Crows do it, as do Pine Bunting & Yellowhammer – you pay your money and take your choice!



Just when you think you've cracked it – gular pouch angle = 50 degrees, but look at where the bare skin above the gape line joins the eye! This bird was on the Ash Levels on May 13th 2006.

Oh! The joys of birding – thank God it hasn't been reduced to an exact science, despite the fact that there are "Experts?" out there that think they know it all and are prepared to sit in judgement. Remember that the definition of Expert is "X = the unknown quantity & spurt = a drip under pressure!"

Take care & Good Birding

Dylan – August 2006