



Little Pied Cormorant following one (above) and two (below) Australian White Ibises, Wonnerup, W.A., March 1994.

Plate 30

Photos: G.F. Mees

**Feeding Association Between Little Pied Cormorant
Phalacrocorax melanoleucos and Australian White Ibis
*Threskiornis molucca***

The Little Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* is described by Marchant & Higgins (1990, p. 905) as usually feeding alone, but sometimes in groups which may also include Little Black Cormorants *P. sulcirostris*. In addition, a single observation of individuals following feeding Great Egrets *Ardea alba* has been cited (Bolger & Wall 1959). There may be other published observations of the Little Pied Cormorant associating with other bird species when feeding, but it is apparent that such behaviour has only rarely and casually been recorded.

Despite encroaching development, the lower course and estuary of the Vasse River, on the coastal plain between Busselton and Wonnerup, W.A., is one of the richest swamp regions remaining in south-western Australia. In winter the water depth may exceed a metre, but in late summer large areas fall dry, and others become very shallow. Birdlife becomes concentrated in remaining waters, especially the estuary at Wonnerup. The shallow water, no more than 10-20 cm in depth, makes an attractive feeding habitat for many species of birds, including the Australian White Ibis

Threskiornis molucca. Since 1993, on many occasions I have seen Little Pied Cormorants associate with feeding Australian White Ibises. An Ibis starting to forage is often joined by a Cormorant, which dives around it, sometimes in water so shallow that part of its body remains visible above the surface. The Cormorant not only follows a feeding Ibis, but also dives alongside and in front of it, even near its bill. If the Ibis flies to a different feeding-patch, its companion Cormorant follows by swimming or flying. I have seen up to three Cormorants associate with a single Ibis.

At this locality, during dry conditions, the association was so close that I would not expect to see a Cormorant feeding away from an Ibis. On the other hand, as frequently more Ibises than Cormorants were present, it was usually possible to observe unescorted feeding Ibises.

The feeding association between these species here must be a recent development because Australian White Ibises were first recorded from the south-western part of Western Australia in 1952, and have become common only in the past 20 years (Serventy & Whittell 1976, pp. 133-137; Storr 1991, pp. 30-31). The association is clearly one-sided: it is the Cormorant which seeks out the Ibis, and uses it as a 'beater'. The Ibis tolerates this as it appears not to interfere with its own feeding, which is tactile, not visual.

Once I saw a Little Pied Cormorant approach a White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae*, which was feeding in shallow water near the bank. The reaction of the Heron was almost immediate: it flew away. Unlike the Ibis, the Heron forages optically, and a cormorant scrabbling around it in the shallow water, bringing up mud and disturbing potential prey, may adversely affect its feeding efficiency.

References

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