

# Noteworthy bird records on San Andrés island, Colombia

*Registros notables de aves en la isla de San Andrés, Colombia*

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## Abstract

A Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* was observed at sea off San Andrés island, Colombia in January 2015. Various distant photographs were taken. It is discussed whether these photographs objectively allow identification for treatment as a first 'confirmed' national record. Noteworthy records on San Andrés from the same week are presented of Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianum* and American Coot *Fulica americana*. All these birds were observed during a period of storms.

**Keywords** Vagrants, confirmed record, freshwater, coot, storm

## Resumen

Se observó un Cormorán Orejudo *Phalacrocorax auritus* en el mar cerca la isla San Andrés, Colombia en enero de 2015. Se tomaron varias fotografías a distancia. Se discute acá si estas fotografías objetivamente facilitan la identificación de la especie para su tratamiento como el primer registro 'confirmado' para el país. Se presentan detalles de otros registros interesantes en el mismo periodo: Cormorán Neotropical *Phalacrocorax brasilianum* y Focha Americana *Fulica americana*. Todos estas especies, fueron observadas durante un periodo de tempestades.

**Palabras clave** Accidentales, registros confirmados, focha, tempestad

## Introduction

San Andrés is a Caribbean island lying c.160 km east of Nicaragua, but forms a contiguous part of Colombia's national territory. The island, and neighbouring Providencia, are host to various endemic landbirds, some of which are afforded species rank. The islands have been the subject of several historic expeditions and studies (Cory 1887, Fisher & Wetmore 1931, Bond & Meyer de Schauensee 1944, Bond 1950, Paulson *et al.* 1969, Russell *et al.* 1979, Tye & Tye 1991). More recently, the island has emerged as an important area for long-term migratory monitoring programmes and bird conservation initiatives (McNish 2003, Salaman *et al.* 2008, Pachecho Garzón 2012). A number of new national records for Colombia have been recorded in San Andrés and its neighbouring island Providencia in recent years, particularly during the autumn migratory period, when unusual species can sometimes occur (Salaman *et al.* 2008, Pachecho Garzón 2012, Ward-Bolivar & Lasso-Zapata 2012).

## Methods

We observed birds at various localities across the whole of San Andrés island from 6-9 January 2015, using observations, taking some sound recordings and photographs. Details of localities are set out in the species accounts under "Results" below. During 5-7 January 2015, a mild tropical storm affected the region,

with force 5-6 easterly winds and interspersed heavy showers.

## Results: Noteworthy Records

### Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*

We observed a Neotropical Cormorant flying low over Big Pond (12°32'51"N, 81°43'14"W), an inland lake, on 8 January 2015 at c.7am. It was accompanied by a female Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*. The pair flew in from the west, descending, and then departed east, ascending. The frigatebird came to the water surface to drink but the cormorant only circled the water body, coming in less close. The cormorant is illustrated in Fig. 1. It is clearly *P. brasilianus* on account of tail length and shape, its broad neck and the lack of an extensive gular pouch.

Although the occurrence of this species in San Andrés is widely cited, the only previous record appears to be that of McNish (2003), who published a photograph of unspecified location or date. None of the other previous studies cited in the Introduction includes any cormorant records and there are no historical cormorant specimens logged for San Andrés (Biomap Alliance Participants 2014). This is apparently the first record for the island with a documented locality and date.



**Figure 1.** Neotropical Cormorant over Big Pond, 8 January 2015. BH.

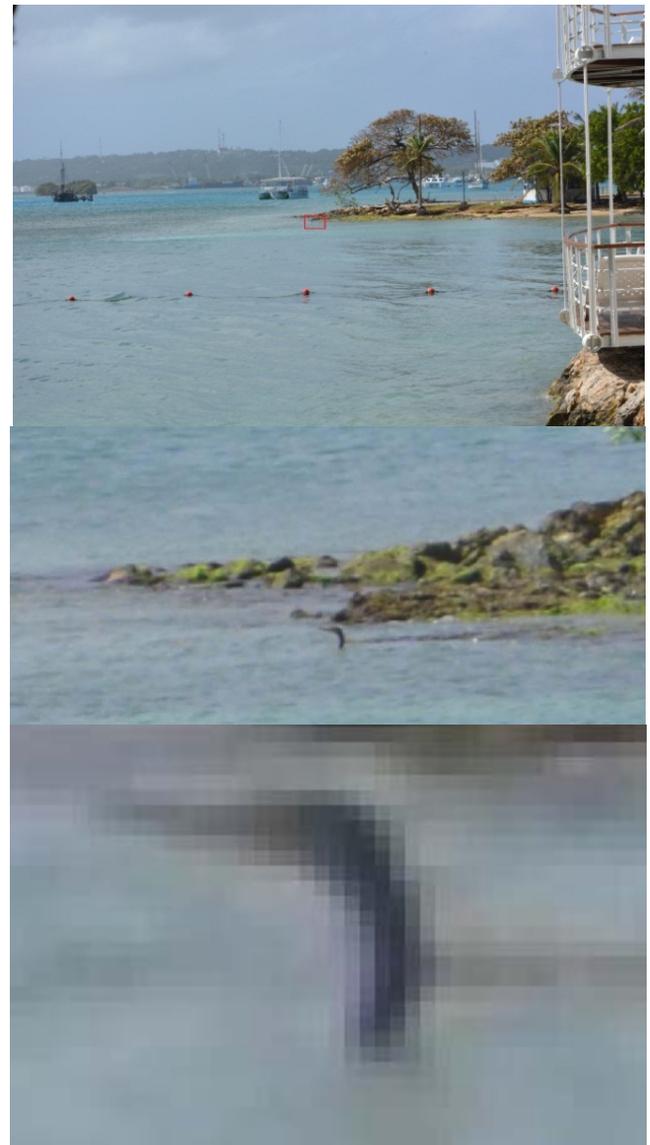
**Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus***

On 6 January 2015, TD observed this species in the Bahía de San Andrés, on sea between the northernmost point of the marina and Decameron Aquarium hotel (12°34.46"N, 81°41.20"W). The location is on the north-east corner of San Andrés, close to the most easterly point of the island. The hotel comprises a series of round buildings on artificial islands, creating calm waters between the islands and adjacent marina point. When a heavy rain shower subsided at around 10 am, the cormorant was seen at close quarters (c.20 m distance). It was flushed and started to move gradually away, diving actively. An extensive yellow/orange gular pouch was clearly present, which was a little paler towards the neck. It had a relatively heavy bill, long and slender neck and bill, rounded head, a stubby, rounded tail and blackish mantle, wings and tail. The bird was identified immediately as an adult Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* in winter plumage. The observer knows this species from 'twitching' the first Western Palearctic bird at Billingham, Cleveland, in 1989 (Williams 1996) and during more recent visits to Florida.

A photograph of the bird was taken using a smartphone (Fig. 2) and then later with a camera (Figs. 3-4). By the time the camera shots were taken, the bird was more distant, dived relentlessly and became increasingly distant, before rounding the small peninsula illustrated behind it in Fig. 3, and becoming out of sight.



**Figure 2:** Double-crested Cormorant on San Andrés, blurred photograph taken with phone. TD.



**Figure 3:** Double-crested Cormorant on San Andrés, showing location of bird and close up of the same image with two progressive expansions of the same. TD.

This observation constitutes the second published Colombian record and the first for San Andrés island. The only previous published record relates to a bird

observed at Represa Agua Dulce, Isla Providencia (13°20'35"N, 81°23'13"W) on 22 October 2001 by Paul Salaman and Robert Burrige (Salaman *et al.* 2008).

Figs. 2-4 clearly show an individual of the family Phalacrocoracidae, with a long, kinked black neck, upturned bill about the same length as the head and much of the body underwater whilst swimming. In Fig. 3, the bird is emerging from a dive, with only the neck and head visible. Other shots in Fig. 4 show the body of the same bird when swimming, demonstrating that this is not an Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga* (a species in which only the neck is held above water when swimming). Figs. 2-4 are too blurred to allow plumage details, tail length proportions or bare skin coloration to be shown clearly. However, some identification features are discernible from the photographs, all of which point to it being of *P. auritus* and not Neotropical Cormorant *P. brasiliensis* (see e.g. Orta *et al.* 2014):

1. A long and heavy bill, even perhaps longer than average for *P. auritus* and most unlike that of (generally) shorter- and stouter-billed *P. brasiliensis*.
2. The head shape is slender and gradually rounded, not 'bumped' towards the rear crown as often seen in *P. brasiliensis*. Double-crested Cormorant only shows head tufts in the breeding season.
3. Brownish pixels (reflecting the orange/yellow gular patch) are visible in the close up image of the head (Fig. 3), at least from the bill to the mid-head (gular) distally, typical for *P. auritus*. In *P. brasiliensis*, the gular pouch is more restricted.
4. The neck is rather long and slender for *P. brasiliensis* (see also Fig. 4).
5. Although both species occur in freshwater and salt water, *P. auritus* is more typically a salt water species, especially in the Caribbean region (Bond 1961).

This was not therefore the Neotropical Cormorant seen two days later and discussed above. Finally, Great Cormorant *P. carbo* is considered a possible vagrant to the Yucatán (Howell & Webb 1995) but is more robust, typically with a white gular pouch and sits higher in water.

For independent verification, two ornithologists closely familiar with both possible cormorant species were sent the photographs, with a note they were from Colombia but without further explanation or

suggestion as to identification. Both thought the photographs most likely to depict a Double-crested Cormorant, for some of the reasons stated above.

With the growth of digital photography, there have been other instances of non-ideal photographs taken in the field of new or previously unconfirmed species for Colombia. In some cases, relatively hazy photographs have been enough to allow objective identification and treatment of new records as 'confirmed' first national records (e.g. Freeman *et al.* 2012's Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorum*; see Donegan *et al.* 2012), meaning that species need no longer be treated as "hypothetical" nationally. The photographs presented here are clearly a cormorant and various discernible features point to *P. auritus*, consistent with field observations. These materials may therefore be considered sufficient to comprise evidence of a confirmed record.

#### **American Coot *Fulica americana***

We observed a flock of c.30-40 American Coots *Fulica americana* at San Luis pond (referred to as 'Dorna Pond' by Pacheco Garzón 2012; 12°31'19"N, 81°42'55"W) on 7 January 2015 (Fig. 5). They can be identified as of this species and not Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* by their relatively unextensive white crown shields, which lack yellow markings. This species was apparently first recorded on the island by Paulson *et al.* (1969) in the winter of 1966-7 in large groups of up to 100 individuals. Although no locality was specified, the authors referred to ponds south of San Luis as being a most productive observation point for waterbirds, so our records likely refer to the same locality. McNish (2003) includes a photograph of unspecified date or location but the species is not reported in other subsequent ornithological studies or in historical collections (Biomap Alliance Participants 2014). The subspecies which occurs on San Andrés (*americana*) was not previously documented in Colombia by a photographic record of known locality and date.

#### **Other migratory species**

Various other migrants were recorded. None of these are new records for the island (Pacheco Garzón 2012). Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* (Big Pond, 8 January), Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius* (Big Pond, 8 January and Aquarium, 6 January), Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (rocky coast on north-west of island, 7 January), Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon* (flew past at sea north of the airport, 7 January), Louisiana Waterthrush *Parkesia motacilla* (Big Pond, 8 January), Black-and-white Warbler

*Mniotilta varia* (Big Pond, 8 January), Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia* (Big Pond, 8 January), Magnolia Warbler *Setophaga magnolia* (scrub near *P. auritus* observation locality at marina, 6 & 8 January), American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* (Big Pond, 8 January), Palm Warbler *Setophaga palmarum* (scrub near marina, 6 January), Tennessee Warbler *Oreothlypis peregrina* (Big Pond, 8 January), Grey Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis* (scrub near marina, 6 & 8 January) and Wood Thrush *Hylocichla mustelina* (scrub near marina, 6 January). All were presumably over-wintering.

## Discussion

This minor influx of unusual waterbird species to San Andrés in early January 2015 was doubtless connected to the weather conditions. The Double-crested Cormorant appears to have been grounded by heavy rain on a promontory of the island, whilst the Neotropical Cormorant seems to have been lost, on account of its erratic movements. Recent studies on San Andrés (Salaman *et al.* 2008, Pachecho 2012) have often focused on the October migration period, when interesting "falls" of diverse passerines sometimes occur. In the mid-winter, some seabird and other non-resident species make further movements south, as is evidenced from the several recent records of Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* in northern Colombia in January (Salaman *et al.* 1998, Fagan & McMullan 2013). Periods of mid-winter storms may merit further observation efforts on the islands. Doubtless, many migratory or partially migratory bird species of the Caribbean region remain to be recorded on San Andrés.

## Acknowledgements

Paul Salaman and Robert Ridgely kindly reviewed and discussed the Double-crested Cormorant records. Nigel Collar and Oswaldo Cortés provided helpful comments on the manuscript.

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**Figure 4:** Other photographs of the same bird shown in Figs 2-3. These probably only allow identification to genus, but note the visible body in the water and relatively slender neck. TD.



**Figure 5.** American Coots, San Luis pools, 7 January 2015. TD.