Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

SHAG
(Phalacrocorax aristotelis)

Z99

Description

Shags are goose-sized long-necked birds similar to cormorants, but smaller and generally slimmer with a characteristic steep forehead. In the breeding season adults develop a dark glossy green plumage and prominent recurved crest on the front of their head. The green sheen on the feathers results in the alternative name 'Green Cormorant' sometimes being given to the shag.

Although most people are probably more familiar with the cormorant, which is increasingly common inland, the shag is three and a half times more numerous than cormorants. Approximately half the total world population lives in British coastal waters. In the UK they breed mainly in the north and west coasts, with over half their population found at fewer than 10 sites. Shags usually stay within 100-200km of their breeding grounds.

Like many coastal birds the shag is as at home in the water as it is in the air. Dives for food are typically around 20-45 seconds, with a recovery time of around 15 seconds between. This recovery period is necessary because the bird depends on the oxygen in its lungs and dissolved in its bloodstream during the dive. When they dive, they jump out of the water first to give extra impetus to the dive.



Did you know ...

The Latin word *phalacrocorax*, meaning cormorant, derives from two Greek words meaning bald raven. The shag's Latin name means Aristotle's cormorant.

What does it eat?

Shags eat a wide range of fish, but their commonest prey is the sand eel. They will travel many kilometres from their roosting sites in order to feed. Shags have been known to dive to at least 45 metres. Shags are preponderantly benthic feeders - that is, they find their prey on the sea bottom.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Vital Statistics
Eggs: 3
Incubation: 30 days
Fledging: 53 days
Maximum recorded lifespan: 15 years
Length: 72-79cm
Wingspan: 95-110cm
Weight: 1760-2154g
UK breeding population: 46,000 pairs
UK wintering population: 100-150,000 birds





UK Distribution

What does it sound like?
Grunts and croaks during the breeding season; generally silent in winter.

Breeding
The shag breeds on coasts, nesting on rocky ledges or in crevices or small caves. The nests are untidy heaps of rotting seaweed or twigs cemented together by the bird's own guano. The nesting season is long, beginning in late February, but some nests are not started until May or even later. Three eggs are laid. Their chicks hatch without down and so they rely totally on their parents for warmth, often for a period of two months before they can fly. Fledging may occur at any time from early June to late August, and exceptionally to mid October.