

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Cormorant
Erie's Newcomer Shorebird

By David Frew
October 2021

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.



The double-breasted cormorant

By the early 1990s I had spent thousands of hours sailing on Lake Erie and I thought that I had become familiar with shorebirds. I delighted in introducing children and grandchildren to ducks, geese, loons, osprey, swans, and other migratory birds. Field guide in hand, wife Mary Ann and I tried to explain the wonders and mysteries of the beautiful birds that showed up each spring, flew north and then returned in the fall. In early July 1993, I volunteered to help deliver a friend's sailboat to Killarney, Ontario on the Georgian Bay. Departing Port Dover with John Mitchell and Terry Walsh, we raised the sails and headed west for the Detroit River. The trip up the lake took about 24 hours and, by the

next afternoon, we were motoring up the Detroit River. Stopping for the evening at Windsor, Ontario we resumed our trek up Lake St. Claire and the St. Clair River for another day before reaching the Port of Sarnia at suppertime. The next day, we sailed north along the Ontario shore of Lake Huron, rounded the tip of the Bruce Peninsula in late afternoon of our fifth day at sea, and tied up at Tobermory, Ontario.

The trip, to that point, had been hurried and difficult as we were pounding into big waves, ducking out of cold spray, and pressing to reach the final destination in a reasonable time. But the last leg of the journey promised to be much more relaxed. We had a slip reservation at the dock in front of the Killarney Mountain Lodge and knew that the last part of our trip would be an easy sail under sunny skies. We departed Tobermory at 8 a.m. and spotted the pink mountains behind Killarney within an hour. With a fresh wind on the beam and a clear sky, we were happily making way at about eight knots when I noticed a squad of strange-looking black birds, which seemed to be paralleling our course. They were flying along next to us about 20 or 30 yards to starboard.

My friend Terry identified them immediately. "Cormorants!" he yelled.

Terry had spent many days in the Georgian Bay and noted that cormorants were common there. I was fascinated by them and could not recall ever having seen one before. John explained why the flock was following us. Georgian Bay cormorants had been conditioned to follow boats, hoping they would receive handouts of fish parts from commercial fish tugs that frequented the area. Fishing was alive and well during those days and the tugs regularly made port in Killarney, where we were headed, with loads of freshly caught whitefish. As the tugs were heading toward port, commercial fishermen would clean fish and toss the "unwanted parts" overboard. And that was what was attracting the birds. The promise of free food! Traditionally, Georgian Bay fish tugs, like those in Lake Erie, have attracted seagulls, but cormorants are much more aggressive and had driven the seagulls away.

As we closed on the Port of Killarney, which is a popular Georgian Bay-North Channel entry point, we began to see fish tugs and, almost as soon as we had sailed to within a mile of them, the cormorants left and flew to be closer to them. We continued to watch as large flocks of the big black birds converged over fish tugs while their crews pulled their nets and began to head for port. And then something quite shocking happened. We were paralleling a fish tug, following the same general course toward shore, when we heard the distinct sound of a shotgun. A second blast, and then another. When we glanced toward the source of the sound, we could see two fishermen at the open, side-door of a fish tug with guns, shooting at the cormorants that were following them. The birds were easy targets since they were so close. Several dropped lifeless into the water.



Our ultimate goal was to find a peaceful anchorage in a protected North Cannel inlet.

I was absolutely shocked, but my companions were not. They told me that commercial fishermen hated cormorants since the Georgian Bay birds were eating tons of fish each season and their numbers were increasing. And unlike most of the familiar diving birds in Lake Erie, cormorants were said to be targeting the very same commercial species that were enormously valuable. Not only did the birds forage for whitefish in the open waters of the lake but they had learned to spot offshore gill nets and rob them of captured fish. They were such deadly fishermen that they were able to dive to the depths of a gill net and either extract small whitefish or mutilate them. The fishermen were shooting because they hated the birds, and the sport provided pre-duck hunting season target practice. What they were doing was illegal in the strict sense, but essentially ignored by authorities.

Although cormorants have been despised by fishermen for generations, their reputation may not be entirely deserved. Fisheries research suggests that they are opportunistic hunters, dining on species that are easiest to find. There is no evidence they target prized commercial fish. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the large black bird, however, was its geometric population growth. Cormorants, like several other shorebird species, had almost disappeared during the DDT era, but they were obviously making an enormous comeback and returning each season in larger numbers.



Killarney's town center is dominated by a British style, fish & chips restaurant, which is supplied by Georgian Bay fish tugs. The only fish served is whitefish. Hot dogs or hamburgers in Killarney? Never.

Some research quickly supported popular legends of the cormorant that my friends had provided. An aggressive and athletic bird, the cormorant can dive to 25 feet, chase and overtake fish with its webbed feet providing propulsion. They are able to compress their thin hydrodynamic bodies, which are characterized by oily and water-resistant shoulder feathers making them even more athletic. Once it catches a fleeing fish, the cormorant's hooked beak is deadly. When it is gored by the sharp beak, a fish cannot escape. The cormorant is a virtual fishing machine with adult cormorants eating approximately one pound of fish per day.

Several years after that original Georgian Bay introduction I was sailing on Presque Isle Bay during a crisp fall day when I spotted a flock of cormorants. The unmistakable black birds took a slow lap along the peninsula, swung around in a big circle, and landed west of the Erie Yacht Club on the sheltered end of the bay. That was the first year I saw cormorants in Erie but not the last. Since that day, they have arrived on schedule each season on their way to southerly winter habitats. And every year there have been more of them. It is clear from the research that population pressures are forcing them south and that a bird that was once seen only "up north" in places like the Georgian Bay, has become a regular Lake Erie resident as well as a migration visitor. As the number of cormorants has increased, fisheries and other wildlife biologists have become concerned. Cormorants outcompete other shorebirds for space and consume much of the food supply formerly used to sustain blue herons, egrets and other birds. Social characters, they roost together in trees near shore, and after doing so their guano effectively destroys host trees.



A gathering of cormorants on the Niagara River, where they have become endemic.



Roosting cormorants can destroy a tree, both by stripping branches for nests and by fouling it with waste.

In recent years it has become obvious that the cormorant population may need to be managed. There have been several active management programs on Lake Erie, including painting eggs with a chemical so that babies will not hatch, aggressively removing nests, using sirens to prevent the birds from nesting, actually killing adult birds and most recently, several proposals for cormorant hunting seasons. Cormorant hunting is under consideration in Ohio, Ontario, and Michigan, although it is doubtful that hunters would find the almost-all-muscle bird to be a delectable food item.

Meanwhile, cormorant lovers continue to fight against control efforts. They argue in favor of the bird's long and fabled history and note that there are dozens of world cultures where the cormorant is revered. In Japan, for example, traditional fishermen capture young cormorants and train them to fish, controlling the birds with long leashes when they take them to dive for fish. Cormorant lovers also argue that the bird eats more junk and invasive fish than prized commercial species and note that it may be distrusted because it is black. Not the cormorant's fault. It has also been noted that the cormorant was once a symbol of strength and agility. Packard, the esteemed American luxury car, for example, used a cormorant as a product symbol and hood ornament for decades.



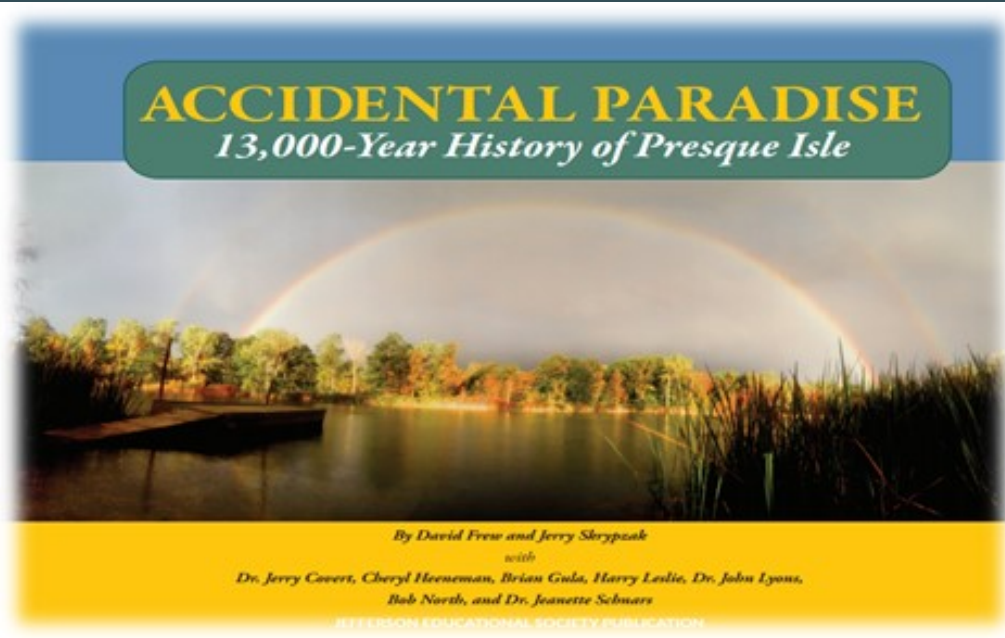
A 1950s-era Packard flying cormorant hood ornament

On September 16, 2021, when my wife Mary Ann and I were hiking near Waterworks on Presque Isle, we spotted a huge flock of cormorants flying along the beach. A few moments later we saw a dozen of the birds perched on

the roof of the pumphouse with their wings extended.

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

Subscribe to JES Publications Emails!

Subscribe to Book Notes Emails!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An

emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



JES Global Summit XIII Buy Your Tickets Today!

JES Global Summit XIII is just around the corner, and tickets are now available for purchase on our [website](#). The Jefferson is excited to be back in action this fall with in-person events! Global Summit XIII will take place in-person with events from November 1 through 12.

Our keynote speaker this year is none other than [President George W. Bush](#)! This program, moderated by Steve Scully, longtime Global Summit chairman and Senior Vice President of Communications for the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D.C., will include an exclusive conversation with President Bush who will discuss the challenges facing the nation in the 21st century and the powers of freedom.

Gov. Tom Ridge, inaugural Secretary of Homeland Security, was instrumental in organizing President George W. Bush's event for this Global Summit. Ridge, who served two terms as Governor of Pennsylvania, will also participate in this program through a Q&A session with Steve Scully.

Click the link below to read the full speaker biographies and event descriptions, as well as purchase tickets for the events you are interested in. Hurry! Tickets go fast. We can't wait to see you back at the Jefferson!

Important to Note:

- For questions, please call the Jefferson at 814.459.8000.
- **Physical tickets will be mailed out to registrants in the coming weeks** please make sure that your contact info, including mailing address, is up to date on your account.
- We accept annual memberships on a rolling basis. New members are still able to apply member benefits to GS XIII tickets at this time. [Become a member](#) today!
- All attendees will be required to wear masks if Erie County is in the “substantial” or “high” transmission rate of community spread on the day of an event. Attendees must also provide proof of full vaccination or a negative Covid-19 test within the last 72 hours. **Please see our FULL Covid-19 policy [here](#).**

JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Global Summit XIII
Coming this fall!

To see the full lineup, including the keynote speaker, please visit jeserie.org/global-summit

November 1-12, 2021

Click Here to Buy Tickets!

THANK YOU TO OUR LEAD SPONSORS

LECOM HEALTH Erie Insurance® Thomas B. Hagen Dignitas Award

ERIE NEWS NOW PNC LOGISTICS+ GANNON UNIVERSITY

ERIE COUNTY GAMING REVENUE AUTHORITY The Erie Community Foundation BROCK INSTITUTE Printing Concepts, Inc.

RBC Wealth Management Marquette SAVINGS BANK JET 24 FOX 66 YourErie.com MENAJERIE STUDIO

In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #75: On Turning 75](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Bay Rat Fashion Accessories: Shopping at the Army Surplus Store](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew.

[Erie's Diversity is the Path to Prosperity: Tackling the Teacher-to-Student Mismatch](#) written by Sustainable Solutions Consultant Court Gould, MPA

