

On the alleged breeding of Great Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) in Bohemia in the 17th century

O údajném hnízdění kormorána velkého (Phalacrocorax carbo) v Čechách v 17. století

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Mlíkovský J. 2005: On the alleged breeding of Great Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) in Bohemia in the 17th century. *Sylvia* 41: 137–139.

Balbín (1679) reported on Great Cormorants, which annually visited the Labe river at Litoměřice in northwestern Bohemia in summer and autumn. Jirsík (1956) erroneously interpreted this observation as a breeding record, and his interpretation was accepted by subsequent avifaunists. A revision of the original report resulted in the correction of this information. Breeding records of Great Cormorants from Central Europe were very rare in the 17th century and no are known from the territory of the Czech Republic.

Balbín (1679) zaznamenal opakovaný výskyt kormoránů velkých na Labi poblíž Litoměřic v severozápadních Čechách. Jirsík (1956) jeho zprávu mylně interpretoval jako doklad hnízdění, což bylo akceptováno autory následných přehledů regionální avifauny. Kontrola původní publikace vedla k opravě této informace. V 17. století bylo hnízdění kormoránů velkých ve střední Evropě zaznamenáno jen velmi zřídka. Z území dnešního České republiky doložené není.

Keywords: Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Czech Republic, breeding, historical records, 17th century

First breeding of the Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (Linnaeus, 1758) on the territory of the Czech Republic in modern times was recorded in 1938 (Glíž 1939; see also Hudec & Černý 1972, Hudec 1994, Martincová et al. 2000), which coincides with the onset of the range expansion of the inland populations of this species in Europe (see Bauer & Glutz 1966, Cramp & Simmons 1977; for subsequent population explosion of the inland subspecies *Phala-*

crococorax carbo sinensis (Blumenbach, 1790) see e.g. van Eerden & Gregersen 1995, Marion 1997, Marion et al. 1997, Rutschke 1998, Snow & Perrins 1998). Jirsík (1956) reported on an earlier, historical breeding record of Great Cormorants at the Labe river near Litoměřice (50.5° N, 14.1° E), northwestern Bohemia, Czech Republic, citing Balbín (1679) as the source of this observation. Following Jirsík (1956), subsequent authors accepted this breeding record

as valid and included it in respective surveys of regional avifaunas (Bauer & Glutz 1966, Hudec & Černý 1972, Hudec 1994).

There is no doubt that the birds described by Balbín (1679) were Great Cormorants. However, there is nothing in his book what would indicate that Great Cormorants bred in Bohemia. In fact, Balbín (1679: 155–156) reported that flocks of Great Cormorants annually visited the Labe river at Litoměřice in summer and autumn, that Great Cormorants are able divers, that they feed on large fish, and that they rest and dry their feathers in tall trees growing on river islets. He added that boys from Litoměřice climb on these trees, lurk there for cormorants and shoot them. Balbín (1679) also mentioned that he never heard of cormorants from other parts of Bohemia. There are two main points, why the observations by Balbín (1679) cannot be interpreted as evidence for breeding: (1) Balbín made no notice of anything related to breeding activities, although his description of cormorants is quite detailed, and (2) he explicitly wrote that cormorants always arrived in summer, whereas they are currently known to arrive at breeding sites in the Czech Republic from late February to early March and to leave them in August (see Šťastný et al. in Hudec 1994). Non-breeding birds appear then outside of breeding sites from mid September to late November (e.g. Hudec et al. 1966). Hence, the summer arrival reported by Balbín coincides with the post-breeding dispersal of cormorants.

Although the report by Balbín (1679) does not refer to the breeding of Great Cormorants, it remains to be the earliest record of this species in Bohemia and probably the whole Czech Republic. Although Balbín's (1679) observations of cormorants are not exactly dated,

they probably refer to the 1660s and/or 1670s. This record could thus be pre-dated by a Great Cormorant, which was shot in 1653 on the Liechtenstein estate at the confluence of the Morava and Dyje rivers at the Czech/Austrian/Slovak border (Zuna-Kratky et al. 2000: 69). However, there is no evidence that the latter cormorant was recorded within the borders of the current Czech Republic.

Great Cormorants were probably rare and local breeders in Central Europe in the 17th century (Kinzelbach 1999, Kinzelbach & Hölzinger 2000), with relevant records at the Upper Rhine at Strasbourg at the current German/French border (Geus 1982), and at „Tracheberg“ (Śmigród) on the „Bartha“ (Barycz) river in Silesia, Poland (Schwenckfeld 1603: 246). Although it remains unknown how large these breeding colonies were and how long they survived, Schwenckfeld's (1603) observations indicate that inland Great Cormorants bred north of Bohemia already at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, although they were probably absent there prior to 1500 AD (see Ericson & Carrasquilla 1997). This allows hypothesising that Great Cormorants recorded in Bohemia by Balbín (1679) were birds coming from such a colony.

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Došlo 12. září 2005, přijato 6. října 2005.
 Received September 12, 2005; accepted
 October 6, 2005.