

# SEPARATION OF JUVENILE SHAG AND CORMORANT

By Ian McKerchar



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Paul Wilson

This short article is intended to highlight the structural differences useful for the identification of Shag and Cormorant but arose when I received the remarkable series of photographs taken by Greater Manchester photographers Jill Islam and Paul Wilson. Such a sequence of image would have been outstanding from anywhere around the coast of the UK but to have come from a reservoir thirty miles inland in land-locked Greater Manchester where Shag remains a county rarity makes them even more exceptional. This first winter individual was seen briefly at Elton Reservoir and then moved to its close neighbour reservoir Withins.

Shag has acquired more than 25 records in Greater Manchester up to 2008 although only one of those previous records was in August. The Elton Reservoir bird of 2008 occurred during an inland influx of the species throughout the UK during August, which up to the time of writing this article (25th August 2008), had risen to a total of at least 27 inland birds throughout the UK, including a remarkable six individuals together at Draycote Water in Warwickshire! An occurrence of this size seems not to have been mirrored in any August in previous years since the year 2000 at least, although 2005 experienced a somewhat smaller influx and nine Shags together at Holme Pierrepont, Nottinghamshire in August 2007 was particularly outstanding.



Above and below, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam



This Withins Reservoir individual was staggeringly confiding at times but that isn't as usual as one might expect, even for an inland bird and one individual in Birmingham City Centre, West Midlands in December 2005 was similarly as confiding as this bird, spending its time on a canal (surrounded by buildings on all sides) right in the city centre and was found frequently waddling along the towpath!

Ageing immature Shags isn't necessarily all that easy as they show considerable variability within their age groups and undergo almost continuous body moult from their first autumn until they acquire the full adult plumage some two (and occasionally three) years later but this bird's combination of rather uniformly new upperparts (lacking any contrast of new and old feathers), combined with the yellowish-white iris (with a little hint of green already) and pointed longest scapulars would appear to age this individual as a first winter; juveniles largely lack the metallic green gloss so evident on the head and neck of this bird.



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam

Most often, Shag will be separated from Cormorant by its combination of size, structure and jizz, being smaller and slimmer although observers should be aware that female Cormorants (particularly of the race *sinensis*) can appear very small and particularly Shag-like, especially if seen without any comparison. Without size comparison, as we have in isolated images such as these, we can concentrate on the more delicate structural features of the head and bill in particular.



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam and below, second winter Cormorant at Seaforth NR, Lancashire by Ian McKerchar



In the two images above, the structural features of the head are prominent when compared against each other, namely:

- Shag's much steeper forehead against Cormorant's lower, more evenly sloping forehead (but beware of Shag's forehead profile appearing less steep when diving). The highest point of the crown on Shag is clearly just in front of the eye, whereas in Cormorant it is (under normal conditions) well beyond the eye at the rear of the nape.
- Shag's more evenly parallel bill (apart from the base), looking longer and slimmer compared to Cormorant's more tapered bill which appears slightly more wedge shaped.
- The Shag's eye has an isolated appearance due to it being set within dark feathering of the lores and below the eye to the rear of the gape line, whereas the Cormorant's eye is set within bare yellowish skin of the lores and below the eye. Darker feathering on the lores of Cormorant can confuse matters though, especially at long range, when it could appear more Shag-like but careful observation should negate this. Similarly, the gape line on Shag is surrounded by feathering whereas on Cormorant it is set within yellow bare skin.
- From underneath the gape line to the chin the border between the feathering has a very hooked appearance on Shag (projecting forward) but in Cormorant the border is straighter (more vertical) on Cormorants of the race *sinensis* and still much less hooked in the race *carbo*. The bare skin on Cormorant is also usually more obviously yellow or orange coloured (note that Shag never shows any orange colouration on the facial skin).



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam and below, first winter Cormorant at Pennington Flash by Jon Taverner



The above images once again clearly demonstrate the structural features of the head as outlined earlier but note that in these images the neck of the Shag appears thicker than that of the Cormorant which looks much slimmer (the opposite would normally be true!). No doubt some of this is due to the two images not being to scale but the Cormorant has also been involved in actively diving and the plumage is still wet giving a temporarily sleeker and slimmer appearance to the neck.

The image below illustrates how the shape of the crown can also alter when feathers are wet after actively diving. Compare it to the image above of the Cormorant and it looks very similar in shape but this is only a temporary appearance in Shag. Note though, how isolated the eye looks, clearly surrounded by dark feathering.



Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Paul Wilson



Above and below, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Paul Wilson

Although not possible to make out in the above image, Shag's slimmer appearance is notable in flight too (particularly against Cormorant's heavy in-flight appearance with larger head and thicker neck) and has a straighter neck than the more obviously kinked neck of Cormorant. Note in particular the yellowish webs on the feet of this Shag, something Cormorant never shows.

Shag actually has only 12 tail feathers and Cormorant 14 but attempting to utilise this feature in the field is nigh on impossible and it is included here more for interest than as a major identification factor but the above image does however admirably display the distinctive pale panel across the forewing on first winter Shags such as this individual; a feature due to feather wear on the wing coverts.





Above, first winter Shag at Withins Reservoir by Jill Islam

#### Acknowledgements

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#### References

Baker, K. 1993. *Identification Guide to European Non-Passerines*. BTO, Thetford.

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