



## Wildlife Window - Is it an Anhinga or a Cormorant?

### The "Snakebirds" - How to Tell Them Apart

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It's an age-old waterbird debate: Anhinga or Cormorant? Favorite pond visitors to Rivendell are commonly nicknamed the "Snake bird" because they swim completely submerged with only their head and long "snake-like" neck exposed. However, there are two different birds referred to as the Snake bird: the **Anhinga** and the **Cormorant**. From a distance, they can look pretty similar, yet there are some key differences. The best way to tell if the waterbird is an Anhinga or Cormorant is to observe their beaks. Anhingas has a long, straight, pointed beak to spear their prey. Cormorants, on the other hand, have a hooked bills to grab their prey. (Hint: think "c" curve for Cormorant – the shape of their beak.)

Both species hunt their prey by submerging themselves underwater. Both of these birds lack oils on their feathers, allowing them to submerge underwater. Unlike ducks and other waterbirds, Anhinga and Cormorant feathers don't have the same oil texture, making their feathers less waterproof and heavier to fly with when wet. Because of this, both Anhingas and Cormorants have to air-dry between hunts by holding their wings out while perched. Let's learn more about these magnificent "snake birds."

(Bob Frank photos.)

#### **The ANHINGA: Straight, Pointed Beak to Spear Prey**

Anhingas are large, dark water birds with long, thin necks. They have long tails and silver patches on their wings. Anhingas' bills are long, thin, and pointed. When in the water, they submerge their entire body, and only their head remains above water. They will dive completely under water to hunt and spear prey. Anhingas can be found near quiet, calm waters in places such as slow-moving rivers running through Cypress swamps, mangrove-lined inlets and lagoons, wooded ponds, and freshwater marshes.

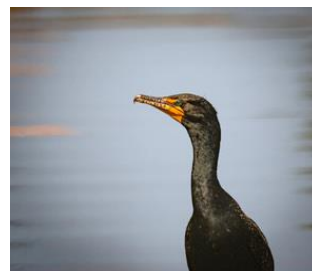
Anhingas are carnivores (piscivores), they mostly eat fish, but will also feed on aquatic invertebrates, amphibians, insects, and reptiles.



#### **The CORMORANT: Hooked Bill to Grab Prey**

Cormorants are large, brown-black water birds with short, blunt tails. They have small heads, with yellow-orange facial skin and long, kinked necks. Cormorants have heavy, hooked bills that are roughly the length of their heads. When in water, their bodies are not completely submerged (unless diving for prey), but they do sit low in the water. They are powerful swimmers and dive down to catch prey. Cormorants can be found living near bodies of water such as lakes, ponds and smaller lagoons.

Cormorants feed primarily on fish, but also eat insects, crustaceans and amphibians. They usually feed in shallow water and close to shore. They catch prey by diving underwater to chase it.



**Differing Flight Habits** - One last identifier in the battle of Anhinga vs. Cormorant is how the two vary in their flight capabilities. Anhingas are able to soar through the sky, using a flapping motion in between soars to get where they want to fly. Whereas, Cormorants are unable to soar, so they flap throughout the entire flight. This helps the Cormorant more easily take flight from the ground vs. Anhingas, which require a taller object to take off and soar through the sky.

Both birds are protected under the US Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Loss of vegetation, use of pesticides and degradation of habitat from urban development, continue to challenge all of our wildlife friends. Our current ponds and preserves management strategies help keep our favorite wildlife creatures visiting our community often.