

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the call for a cormorant cull and invites your thoughts on the subject.

I get really upset by the ‘them-or-us’ attitude so many people have towards wildlife. Why can’t we try a ‘them-and-us’ attitude instead? As a country renowned for our love of wildlife, we should have a more caring culture of coexistence.

Anglers are a case in point. The Angling Trust and the Avon Roach Project have been campaigning for years to be able to kill as many cormorants as they want – claiming that the birds take too many of ‘their’ fish. And they might succeed if a government review of licencing to kill ‘pests’, currently underway, rules in their favour.

I sincerely hope it doesn’t. Allowing cormorants to be gunned down to ‘protect’ fish that anglers then catch themselves – mostly for fun – would be utterly ridiculous and outrageous.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 bans the shooting of wild birds except in special circumstances – and under special licence – once all other means of control have failed. The system is already controversial and, at the very least, needs tougher controls and more transparency. It has authorised the killing of millions of birds – from peregrine falcons and barn owls to swifts and robins – with no monitoring, little control and often no justifiable reason.

In a recent five-year period (2014–2019) cormorants were targeted by more special licences than any other bird. No fewer than 1,500 licences were issued in England alone – mainly to angling and fishing interests – and each one permitted from a few to as many as 58 cormorants to be killed.

The scale of the killing has been dreadful – but could get worse if cormorants are added to so-called ‘general licences’, which is what anglers are fighting for. The subject of much recent debate and controversy, these were introduced in the 1990s to allow the legal control of certain bird ‘pests’ without needing a special licence.

There are 16 species on the list, including crows, rooks, magpies, woodpigeons and lesser black-backed gulls. Anyone can kill these birds – to protect crops and livestock, to prevent damage and disease or to protect other wildlife – without asking permission and without having to record the number of birds killed or the reason for killing them.

Inevitably, there are situations where careful control is necessary (such as when birds become a risk to

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air safety or a genuinely serious threat to crops and livestock). But many anglers want to add cormorants to this list. That’s completely different. And entirely unacceptable.

No one denies that there are more cormorants than there were a few decades ago, or that their wintering grounds have gradually shifted away from rocky coasts to more inland habitats (largely due to an influx of continental birds). But it’s wrong to claim that freshwater fish populations are declining because of excessive predation by these birds. Indeed, the evidence shows that poor water quality and temperature are the main factors affecting fish numbers.

Equally, there is no proof that it’s more effective to kill cormorants than to scare them away. So, before reaching for a shotgun, anglers should think about other options. They could provide underwater refuges for fish, for example, which research shows can reduce the number cormorants eat by up to two-thirds.

As well as all the scientific and practical arguments against a cormorant-killing free-for-all, there is an important principle at stake here. We implore other countries to protect their wildlife – and even expect people to live alongside potentially dangerous animals such as lions and tigers – yet, apparently, we can’t live alongside cormorants. We should know better. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Anglers have dubbed cormorants ‘the black plague’.