

## **【The Relationship between Master and Bird】**

The success of cormorant fishing is heavily dependent on the relationship between the cormorant master and his birds. Caring for and working with them year after year, the master develops such a keen understanding of each bird's physical condition and temperament that he can quickly tell when one needs rest or may be sick. Through this care, his cormorants will live around three times longer than those in the wild.

Several aspects of the cormorant master's craft require that he has a thorough knowledge of each of his birds. Individual care is needed when controlling the tightness of the cord that constricts the cormorant's throat (*kubiyui*) to prevent it from swallowing large *ayu* (sweetfish): too tight, and the bird may be injured; too loose, and the bird will gobble down its catch. The cormorant master must also know each bird's fishing abilities in order to balance his team each night between the most experienced cormorants and those that still need to practice and improve.

### **Cormorant Pairs**

Cormorant masters use a pairing process called *katarai* to help new birds adjust to captivity. Whenever possible, cormorant masters order new birds in pairs, and each new pair is kept separate from the main group for the first few months. At first, the two birds are also kept separate from one another by a partition, but this is removed once they have adjusted to each other's presence. The two cormorants sleep in the same basket and train together at the river. Gradually, they form a close bond, and they continue to support each other after the cormorant master finally integrates them into the main group. A new bird entering alone would be bullied or isolated, but a pair of birds can defend and comfort one another. Paired birds are also less likely to develop shirking behaviors or become withdrawn, which lone birds often do.

Though some species of bird form lifelong pairs for the purpose of mating, *katarai* is not based on sex; in fact, male and female cormorants have identical plumage and are very difficult to distinguish from one another. Nevertheless, the bond lasts for life. If a young cormorant loses its partner by accident or illness, it is sometimes possible to introduce a new partner. Re-pairing older birds, however, is almost never successful. Even if two birds have fished together as part of the larger group for years, when placed in the same basket, they will fight.