

【The Cormorant Fisherman's Year】

For cormorant masters on the Nagara River, the events of the year follow a fixed pattern that is centered around the five-month fishing season. Each year, the fishermen, cormorants, and equipment must all be ready for 150 nights of exhausting labor, and the rest of the year is devoted to preparing for it.

May 11: First Day of the Season

The cormorants are given a thorough medical examination to confirm that they are in good condition. The cormorant masters participate in a Shinto ceremony in which prayers are offered for a bountiful season and the safety of the fishermen. That night, fishing begins.

July 16: Nagara River Festival

This festival marks the arrival of summer and the boating season on the Nagara. The cormorant masters participate in a memorial ritual for the *ayu* (sweetfish) and release fish into the river. Two boats are launched, one strung with white lanterns in the shape of a torii gate, the other with red lanterns in the outline of a three-tiered pagoda. Priests aboard the vessels pray again for safety and a good catch. Fireworks fill the sky. After the evening's fishing concludes, the cormorant masters and other boatmen offer closing prayers.

Mid-Autumn Harvest Moon

This is the only day off that the cormorant fishermen receive during the fishing season. Under the traditional lunar calendar, it was celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, but now the date varies to coincide with the harvest moon (the full moon closest to the autumn equinox). Instead of fishing, the cormorant masters attend a festival at Nagara Wakamiya Hachimangū Shrine. There, they make offerings of sake and *ayu* to the deity Hachiman. The cormorants receive an evening of much-needed rest.

October 15: Last Day of the Season

With the arrival of late-autumn winds, the cormorant boats launch for the last night of the season. Spectators see them off with cheering and fireworks. The flaming message seen in the video reads, "Farewell until next year." On the first Sunday after October 15, a Buddhist memorial service for deceased cormorants

is held. Fishermen and residents express their gratitude for the birds' hard labor and toss strips of paper inscribed with commemorative haiku into the Nagara River.

Winter Months and the Off-Season

From late November into December, newly caught cormorants (*shintori*) arrive from Ibaraki Prefecture. The birds and their masters are a common sight along the riverbank during the winter months as the new cormorants adapt to swimming on a lead and learn their new trade. The cormorant masters are also busy preparing their equipment and supplies for the next season. Hundreds of pine logs must be split for fuel, and new straw skirts (*koshimino*) and straw sandals (*ashinaka*) must be woven by hand. The masters' households also prepare a time-honored specialty of the Nagara River: *ayuzushi*, made by fermenting salted ayu and rice in wooden buckets.