

【Fishing for the Imperial Household】

Cormorant masters of the Nagara River receive a unique title that sets them apart from all other cormorant fishermen in Japan. Six households in the city of Gifu and three households in the city of Seki have been designated Cormorant Fishing Masters of the Imperial Household Agency Board of Ceremonies. The masters are considered employees of the Imperial Household Agency and are responsible for supplying *ayu* (sweetfish) to the imperial family.

Fishing for the imperial household takes place on eight nights during June and August. A special stretch of the Nagara River—upstream from the usual fishing area—is reserved for this task, and no other fishing is permitted there. The cormorant boats set out from Chidori Bridge. No sightseeing boats accompany them, and they forgo displays like the *sōgarami*, focusing instead on catching as many ayu as possible. The boats progress gradually downstream until they reach a point near Hinodōgo Park. Once their duty to the imperial household is fulfilled, the masters take their boats downstream to a stretch of the Nagara where sightseeing boats await their nightly performance.

The Nagara River cormorant masters were first designated employees of the imperial household in 1890. Just prior to this, during the turbulent years of transition between the Edo period (1603–1867) and the Meiji era (1868–1912), the status of cormorant masters and cormorant fishing on the Nagara was uncertain. This display gives a timeline of events beginning in the late nineteenth century that affected local cormorant fishing and eventually led to the fishermen's adoption into the Imperial Household Agency.

- **1871:** The abolition of Japan's domain system removes the ruling Owari clan from power. Both local cormorant fishing and its related distribution system, overseen by the Owari since 1619, come to a halt.
- **1872:** Local fishermen begin paying the annual fishing tax in place of the Owari clan, and cormorant fishing is allowed to resume.
- **1878 and 1880:** Emperor Meiji visits Gifu and is presented with ayu caught by local cormorant fishermen.
- **1890:** Fishing grounds designated for imperial use are established at three places along the Nagara River. Nagara cormorant masters are granted the title of Imperial Cormorant Fishing Master.

- **1949:** The official title of Nagara River cormorant masters is changed to Cormorant Fishing Master of the Imperial Household Agency Board of Ceremonies.