

【Capturing Cormorants】

Cormorant fishing on the Nagara River creates demand for a steady supply of wild-caught cormorants. All of the birds used by Nagara cormorant masters come from a single location in Ibaraki Prefecture known as Cormorant Cape, on the Ishihama coast north of the city of Hitachi. In fact, this single site supplies all of the cormorants used in Japan today—not only on the Nagara but at all 10 cormorant-fishing locations across the country. Cormorant trapping is considered so vital to cormorant fishing that the practice was designated an Intangible Folklore Cultural Asset in 1992.

The Ishihama coast is an attractive waypoint for migratory waterfowl. Its wide, white-sand beach is bordered by rocky ledges and cliffs, an attractive resting spot for weary cormorants. From April to June, the cormorants arrive from the south on their way to breeding grounds in the Kurile Islands and Hokkaido, and from October into December, they stop in Ibaraki on their way to warmer winter locales. For these two periods each year, the cape is closed to the public, and cormorant trappers go to work.

On one of the cliffs, about 15 meters above the sea, trappers have erected a large blind (*toya*) made of woven straw and bamboo. This *toya* is 12 meters long and 3 meters wide, and it runs the length of a rocky ledge where wild cormorants land to rest. Outside the blind, on the cliff's edge, the trappers place live cormorant decoys that they secure to the ledge with a cord around one ankle. The presence of these birds reassures passing wild cormorants that the cliff is safe. Meanwhile, the trapper waits inside the blind, keeping watch through small holes in its walls.

When a wild cormorant lands, the trapper must quickly assess its age. Trappers seek young birds of about two years, identifiable by their brown wings and white-mottled breasts. By age three, cormorants of this species turn almost entirely black. If the bird seems young enough, the trapper very cautiously extends a hook-tipped rod called a *kagibō*. In order to successfully snag the cormorant, the trapper must hook the bird's ankle, pull it beneath the wall and into the *toya*, and secure it by the neck before it can retaliate with its sharp beak. In the past, trappers used bamboo poles with a sticky substance smeared on the end. This substance, called birdlime (*torimochi*), stuck to the bird's feathers and body, preventing it from flying away. Its use became heavily regulated beginning in the late twentieth century, and trappers have switched to the *kagibō*, which also has the advantage of being less likely to cause accidental injury to the cormorants.

Because cormorant fishermen need large, healthy birds of a precise age, only about one in every 10 to 15 trapped birds is kept. They remain in Ibaraki for 10 days

after capture and are tested twice for avian influenza. When it is time to ship the cormorants to their new homes, the trappers tie small wooden boards (*hashigake*) to their beaks to prevent them from biting and put the birds into handwoven straw baskets. Cormorants destined for relatively near locations like Gifu are shipped by truck to the cormorant masters' residences, while more distant clients have their birds delivered by air.

Records from the Edo period (1603–1867) indicate that cormorant trapping has been practiced in Hitachi for centuries. As of 2018, however, the trapping tradition is maintained by only three men. Given its importance to the continuation of cormorant fishing, cormorant trapping is a critical skill. The fishermen add new birds to their flock each year, and they exclusively prefer wild-caught cormorants, which have been used in Japan for over 1,400 years. Captive breeding is considered impractical, since the fishing birds cannot be spared in summer for breeding purposes. Moreover, some cormorant masters believe that wild birds have better instincts and a stronger drive, making them superior fishers.