

【History of Cormorant Fishing (*Ukai*)】

The practice of fishing with trained cormorants is believed to have at least 1,400 years of history, as indicated by cormorant-shaped terra-cotta figurines (*haniwa*) dating to the Kofun period (25–552 CE). Experts disagree on whether the practice of using cormorants to fish came to Japan from China or evolved in the two countries independently. Regardless, evidence of Japanese cormorant fishing (*ukai*) appears in an early-seventh-century Chinese text and also in stories from eighth-century Japanese texts. By the early eighth century, imperially controlled cormorant-fishing organizations regularly supplied the Japanese imperial court with *ayu* (sweetfish). Records from the Heian period (794–1185) suggest that some aristocrats enjoyed displays of cormorant fishing, and that it had an established code of etiquette.

The first record of cormorant fishing in what is now Gifu Prefecture appears in a census from 702. Records from as early as 1473 also show that boats occasionally carried passengers to watch the fishermen at work. In 1568, the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), one of Japan's three great unifiers, occupied Gifu Castle. As a show of hospitality, he presented the visiting warlord Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) with *ayu* caught by the local cormorant fishermen. A great patron of *ukai*, Nobunaga was the first to grant Nagara River fishermen the title of “cormorant master” (*ushō*), and he worked to protect the tradition. In 1615, the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu (1543–1616), watched Nagara cormorant fishing on his return from the Siege of Osaka (1614–1615). Afterward, he decreed that *ayuzushi* (fermented *ayu* stuffed with rice) be sent to Edo Castle as annual tribute. In 1619, the Owari clan, who ruled the region, took over the administration of cormorant fishing and the payment of this tribute.

The fame of *ukai* on the Nagara River spread widely after 1688, following the visit of celebrated *haikai* poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), who wrote a poem about his experience. Both the fishing and the tourism industries flourished until 1871, when the domain system was abolished and the Owari clan was removed from power. The loss of institutional protection left the future of Nagara cormorant fishing uncertain. However, visits by Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) in 1878 and 1880 brought the area imperial recognition and prompted local cormorant fishermen to appeal for official protection. In 1890, three sites on the Nagara River were designated imperial fishing areas, and the heads of nine cormorant-master households—six in Gifu City and three in Seki City—were granted the designation of Imperial Cormorant Fishing Master (since revised to Cormorant Fishing Master of the Imperial Household Agency Board of Ceremonies). Ever since, the cormorant masters have held the hereditary responsibility of supplying

the imperial household with ayu.

During the twentieth century, *ukai* continued to draw spectators to the Nagara River, including foreign visitors. British actor and comedian Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977) first visited during his honeymoon in 1936 and was so entranced by the spectacle that he returned for a second visit in 1961.

Why Cormorants?

Cormorants possess several traits that make them appealing to fishermen. First, they have excellent eyesight, as referenced in the Japanese expression “eyes of a cormorant, eyes of a hawk” (*u no me, taka no me*) which means “with keen perception and intensity.” Unlike hawks, they see best at close range, and their eyes are well adapted to seeing underwater, with specialized lenses that compensate for light refraction. Cormorants’ bodies are also built for speed underwater. They have webbed feet to propel them, and their long necks enable them to reach out and snatch passing prey with their sharply hooked beaks.

Cormorants can also fish in both salt and fresh water, and they are able to dive more deeply than most other marine birds, in some cases as deep as 45 meters. Cormorants in the wild exhibit another behavior that may also have inspired their use in fishing: when trying to escape from danger, they will often spit out fish they have caught in order to flee more swiftly.

Cormorants’ natural sociability and adaptability also make them ideal fishing companions. They adapt to human contact relatively quickly, and just as young cormorants learn to fish in the wild by watching older birds, captive cormorants learn to dive, catch ayu, and deposit them by imitating their companions.

Cormorant fishermen on the Nagara River use Japanese cormorants (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) rather than any of the three other species of cormorant that are native to Japan. Japanese cormorants are the largest and are thought to have the greatest stamina.