

【Cormorant Fishing: An Overview】

Q: What is cormorant fishing?

Called *ukai* in Japanese, cormorant fishing refers to the practice in which humans and cormorants work together to catch fish. In the city of Gifu, cormorant masters and their cormorants set out in boats on the Nagara River every evening for five months each year. The boats move gradually downstream as the cormorants dive for *ayu* (sweetfish), which are collected by the cormorant masters.

Q: Where does cormorant fishing take place?

There are 11 locations in Japan where cormorant fishing is still practiced. In Gifu Prefecture, it is conducted at two places along the Nagara River: near Gifu Castle and in the Oze neighborhood of Seki City.

Q: When does cormorant fishing take place?

Cormorant fishing takes place every evening between May 11 and October 15. The only exceptions are the night of the harvest moon (the full moon closest to the autumnal equinox) and rare nights when high water levels or strong winds make fishing unfeasible.

Q: How long has cormorant fishing been practiced?

Cormorant fishing is an ancient practice. In Gifu Prefecture, records from 702 mention it as a regional occupation. Throughout Japanese history, famous figures such as shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) and Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) have come to watch cormorant fishing on the Nagara River. *Ayuzushi*, a local specialty prepared from cormorant-caught ayu, was sent as tribute to successive shoguns during the Edo period (1603–1867). Since 1890, Nagara River cormorant masters have provided *ayu* to the imperial family.

Q: What is a cormorant master?

Cormorant masters (*ushō*) are the senior fishermen who ride in the boats' prows and work with the cormorants, directing as many as 10 or 12 birds at once. A cormorant master skillfully manages the birds' leads, untangling the lines and pulling cormorants into the boat to collect their fish. The title "cormorant master" is hereditary and belongs to six households in Gifu City and three in

Seki City. These nine *ushō* are the only cormorant fishermen in Japan who are designated as employees of the Imperial Household Agency.

Q: How are the *ayu* (sweetfish) caught?

Before beginning each night's fishing, the cormorant masters tie thin cords around the neck and belly of each cormorant. The neck cords are just tight enough to prevent the cormorants from completely swallowing large fish. When the cormorant master sees a bird with a full gullet, he pulls it back into the boat and holds its beak over a collection bucket. The bird gives up the *ayu*, then dives back into the river to repeat the process.

Q: How do cormorant boats maneuver?

Two to three boatmen ride along with the cormorant master. The one in the rear, responsible for steering, is the *tomonori*. The boatmen use long poles (*sao*) and oars to maneuver. The boatman in the middle is the *nananori*, who also steers and occasionally assists the cormorant master. Sometimes, there is also a *nanauzukai*, usually an apprentice of the master, who manages a small number of birds.

Q: What kind of relationship do the cormorant masters have with their cormorants?

The connection between the cormorants and their master is very strong. Cormorant masters keep their birds in or near their own residences, feed them by hand, and care for them throughout the year. From the time a new bird arrives, it is handled and trained by the cormorant master. In the past, a cormorant master even spent part of the off-season on the river with his birds, eating and sleeping with them in the same boat.

Q: How can I watch cormorant fishing?

Each night during the fishing season, traditional wooden boats carry spectators alongside the fishing boats to watch the action. Guests aboard these boats can dine on local *ayu*-based dishes while taking in the spectacle. The evening's finale comes when all six cormorant boats line up across the breadth of the river in a carefully choreographed formation called the *sōgarami*.