

【Receiving and Training New Cormorants (*Shintori*)】

The cormorants that fish the Nagara River are all wild-caught birds. New birds, or *shintori*, are captured in Ibaraki Prefecture and shipped to Gifu in either spring or autumn. Nagara River cormorant masters generally order at least one new cormorant per year, and sometimes as many as four at once. New birds are typically ordered in pairs in order to give them a companion. This arrangement prevents either bird from becoming isolated or bullied until they are fully incorporated into the cormorants' social hierarchy.

Cormorant trappers capture birds before they reach full maturity, at around two years of age. The newly caught cormorants arrive at the cormorant master's house in special woven baskets with wooden blocks called *hashigake* tied around the upper parts of their beaks. The *hashigake* is about 5 centimeters long and has a small hole for the curved tip of the bird's upper beak. While wearing a *hashigake*, the bird can open its mouth but is unable to slash or peck. On the day they arrive, new cormorants first receive full health inspections from a veterinarian. The inner edges of their beaks are then filed down to create a space between the upper and lower mandibles, which minimizes the damage they can do by biting. The cormorant master also trims away five or six flight feathers on one wing of each bird, making them too unbalanced to fly far. Their beaks and flight feathers grow back within several months, but by that point the new cormorants are acclimated to their new circumstances and will not fly away.

New birds are housed separately from the main group for the first two or three months. In order to build familiarity, the cormorant master handles them often. He also takes them to the river to introduce them to their new occupation with short swims. Once the cormorant master has a sense of a new bird's personality and feels confident that it is sufficiently adjusted, the bird is introduced to the main group.

The pecking order among cormorants is not based on age or sex but rather on physical strength and personality. The strongest birds claim the best spots within the coop (*toya*) and defend them against other birds. Cormorants have a naturally fierce disposition and can injure one another severely if fighting goes unchecked. When new birds are introduced, the older birds will assert themselves over the newcomers until a hierarchy has been achieved.

New cormorants are frequently taken on trips to the river, where they learn to dive and swim on a tether (*tanawa*). When first wearing a tether, the cormorants will often flip onto their backs or become tangled in the line. Even once a bird has learned to swim while wearing the *tanawa*, it typically takes significant practice for it to become a successful fisher. When the cormorant master takes a new bird fishing for the first time,

most do not even dive beneath the water. Eventually, new birds will start to imitate the other birds as they dive and chase *ayu* (sweetfish), but a bird is considered especially accomplished if it actually catches a fish in its first year. Most cormorants begin to acquire the skill during the second year, and by their third year, the birds are considered fully trained.