

Of Cormorants and Killies

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For nearly 300 years economics has been the driving force behind the transformation of the Hackensack Meadowlands from a virtually uninhabited coastal estuary into a modern center of commercial and transportation activity. As if in confirmation of this, the Meadowlands Regional Chamber of Commerce reports a membership of more than 700 corporations and individual business owners, the great majority of them based within the 32 square-mile Meadowlands District.

Although the many Meadowlands businesses, both great and small, deal in an almost limitless variety of goods and services, it's a safe bet that none of them have tied their fortunes directly to the availability of a single, seemingly insignificant home-grown Meadowlands product—in this case, a fish.

There was a time in Meadowlands history when just the opposite was true: the great majority of the people living in the region relied directly on its natural bounties as a source of both livelihood and life itself. That was before industrialization and pollution entered the picture in the mid-1800s. Today, only a handful of hardy outdoor types harvest the “natural products” of the Meadowlands (such as muskrats), and none, but perhaps one, is able to make what could be considered a real living at it.

As the Commission's natural resource specialist I have occasion to travel the Hackensack River in one of the Commission's pontoon boats. One day last summer, while preparing for a river eco-cruise at the Carlstadt Golf Center and Marina, I and Brett Bragin, Commission biologist and wetlands specialist, ran into the one man who does actually make a decent buck harvesting the Meadowlands' fishy crop,

and in the course of that day got an object lesson in how economic trends or consumer demands aren't the only factors determining how well a given business does.

Kenny Halvorsen runs a small-business operation called “Kenny's Killer Killies.” A fixture on the “Hacky” for years, Kenny is a hefty, amiable fellow with silver hair and the deep “farmer's tan” of a man who spends a lot of time outdoors; he runs trap lines during the warmer months for the super-abundant common killifish, or mummichog, of the Meadowlands, trucks the catch down to the Jersey Shore where they are marketed to live-bait dealers from Seabright to Barnegat as the fish part of the “killie/squid combo” that is deadly to fluke, or summer flounder. For Kenny, catching fish is not a pleasant pastime—it's a business, just as it is for a tuna longliner or a cod-trawler.

On that hot summer morning last year Brett and I were readying our boat at the dock when Kenny and a young assistant chugged up in his olive-drab aluminum skiff loaded with boxy wire killie traps and other assorted gear. He looked tired and a little distracted. We asked him how the fishing was. “Could be a lot better—I haven't seen it this bad in awhile,” he replied, adding that while the fish were fairly abundant in the river, most were too small (under two inches) to be sold as fluke bait. “Something's up, we're just not getting the bigger ones this year.”

Now, even the largest mummichog, at about six inches, will never grace a plaque in an angler's den, and the species breeds like rabbits and is so hardy that it was once listed as the only fish able to survive and even thrive in the grossly polluted Arthur Kill near Staten Island. The Hackensack's water that day looked pretty “clean” and there seemed to be a lot of killies swimming near the dock; they did indeed look pint-sized, however, so Brett and I were left speculating on just what

might have happened to all the bigger ones this summer.

Later that day, during the part of our river tour that takes in the 1,000-acre Saw Mill Creek Wildlife Management Area, we found what we believed to be the reason for Kenny's lack of fishing success, though it took us awhile to realize it.

Our passengers had been marveling at the abundance of bird life in this beautiful wetland complex when suddenly the realization hit us that most were of one species—the double-crested cormorant. Undertaking a rough count, we estimated that one flock on the west side of the Turnpike in the Saw Mill mudflats contained at least 400 birds, three times the usual number during the summer months. Cormorants were everywhere in the Saw Mill Creek marsh, perched on pilings and bulkheads along the river and swimming and diving for fish ahead of the boat; indeed, there seemed to be many more of them this year than in recent memory.

The double-crested cormorant does not nest in the Meadowlands. Its breeding haunts lie in Maritime Canada and northern Maine, but each year a good number of juvenile birds and non-breeding adults hang around the Hackensack River all summer, for reasons that may have to do with population pressures, the weather or the supply of food fish in the North. It should be noted that back in the 1960s the cormorant was a rare bird indeed in the Meadowlands; Irv Black of the Newark Museum's Urner Ornithological Club considered it a fortuitous event if he spotted more than two of the birds on any given trip.

Today, the species is much more abundant along the East Coast, and given the fact that all cormorants are peerless


divers and anglers, sometimes they're not too popular: Canadian fishermen regularly shoot the birds as competition for dwindling fish stocks.

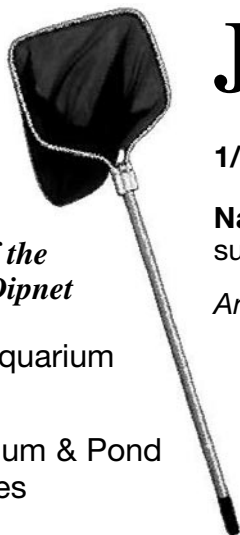
On the other hand, Asian fishermen for centuries have used trained cormorants to do their fishing for them—the birds are prevented from swallowing their catch by a ring tied around their necks, then finally allowed to fish for themselves as the reward for their labors.

In the Meadowlands the double-crested cormorant is indiscriminating in what it will eat, though the favorite prey seems to be white perch, smaller carp, eels, and of course, the mummichog. And thus, we eventually determined, it was the unusual abundance of the cormorant that summer that resulted in the correspondingly unusual scarcity of larger mummichogs, close to the bird's favorite item of diet.

And that, in turn, adversely affected at least one small business in the Meadowlands Region.

We didn't hook up with Kenny Halvorsen again at the end of our cruise that day so we were unable to relay our observations to him and suggest that maybe he try another coastal marsh for his killie crop—at least for the time being.

But this year I've noticed that cormorant numbers seem to have returned to more "normal" levels and there appear to be plenty of big killies probing the river's reedy shorelines. I haven't bumped into Kenny yet this year, but I hope he's back on the river and in the creeks, patrolling his traplines for plump, "flake-killer" mummichogs. Like killies and cormorants, "Kenny's Killer Killies" is an equally vital part of the modern Meadowlands' "natural economy." 



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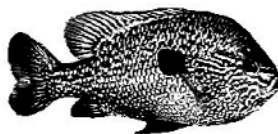
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