

# Little Black Shag in East Kalimantan, Indonesia: First Confirmation of the Species' Presence in Borneo in Over 150 Years

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The Little Black Shag (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*), also known as the Little Black Cormorant, ranges from Borneo, southern Sumatra and Java, eastwards to New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand. It is a bird of inland riverine and lake habitats, and to a lesser extent, tidal creeks and coasts (Harrison 1985; Ortha 1992). Normally the species is conspicuously gregarious and is largely sedentary throughout its range (Harrison 1985). In the western part of its range, i.e., on Borneo and Sumatra, it is rarely recorded (Smythies and Davison 1999; van Marle and Voous 1988), although Harrison (1985) lists the species as a breeding resident in Borneo. In contrast, on Java, the species has become more numerous over the last decades and it is thought that Little Black Shags observed in southern Sumatra originate from western Java (MacKinnon *et al.* 1999). Due to the lack of records of the Little Black Shag in Borneo, van Balen and Prentice (1997: 95) suggested that the species might have become locally extinct.

Here we report on observations of the Little Black Shag in the Middle Mahakam Lakes area in the province of East Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo, and discuss the species' status on the island of Borneo.

## STUDY AREA AND METHODS

The Middle Mahakam Lakes in East Kalimantan (Fig. 1) consists of several large shallow lakes with a combined average surface area of approximately 39,000

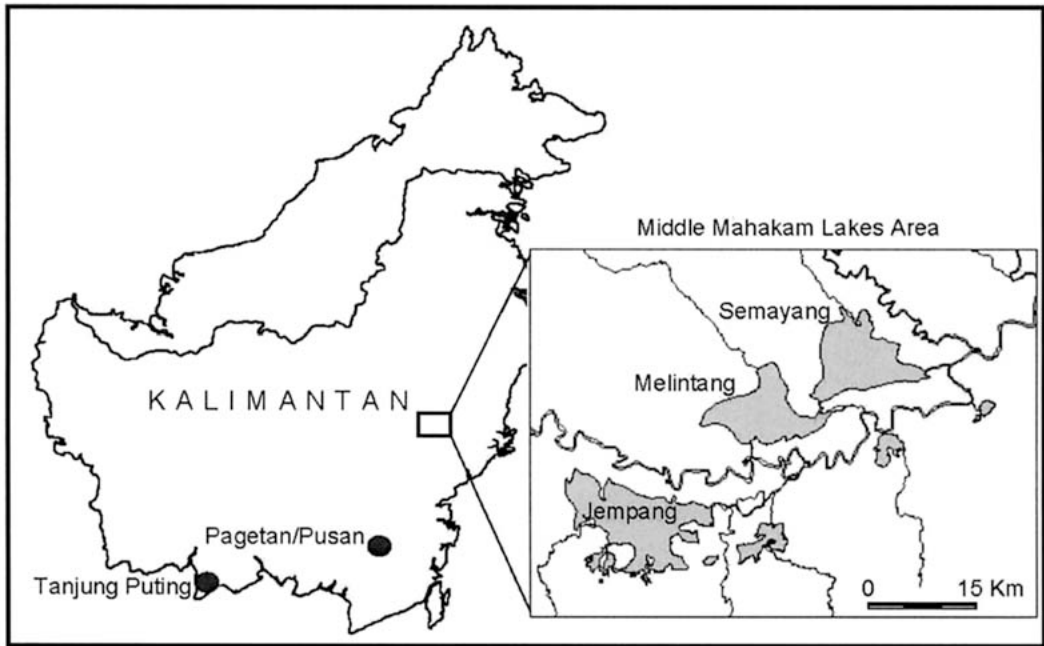
ha. The size of the lake varies greatly, depending on the season, with depth fluctuations of more than 6 m. The lakes and their in-flows have a very high biodiversity with significant numbers of rare and endangered wildlife (for a description of the area see Gönner 2000). From 1988-2004 we surveyed the area using small motorized boats for a total of 430 days. CG's surveys (1988-2004) were primarily centred on the area of Lake Jempang and the Ohong River whereas VN's surveys (1999-2004) were mostly in the Lake Semayang and Lake Melintang area.

## RESULTS

On 17 September 2003, CG observed two Little Black Shags perching on poles in the western part of Lake Semayang [0°15'S, 116°30'E]. The birds were observed within 30 m for c. 3 min under good light conditions. The birds were all black with a noticeable silvery shine on the wing coverts and a greyish bill. On 19 September 2004, VN, GMF and GFU observed a single all-black cormorant perched on a pole in the northern part of the Melintang Lake [0°15'S, 116°20'E]. The bird was observed for approximately 6 min, and photographs were taken. Later that same day probably the same bird was observed perching on the same pole.

## DISCUSSION

The observed birds are the first records of the Little Black Shag for the Middle Mahakam Lakes area, and the first record for the province of East Kalimantan in Indonesian



**Figure 1.** The island of Borneo, with the Middle Mahakam Lake area in East Kalimantan, and the localities mentioned in the text.

Borneo. Both observations were made in September over consecutive years, during periods of low water levels. Extensive surveys during other months in the preceding decade did not result in additional records. Despite an apparent abundance of suitable habitat for Little Black Shag in Borneo, there are very few records of the species, and the above described records appear to be the first for over 150 years (cf. Smythies and Davison 1999: 652). The only previous confirmed records are in 1851 when J. H. Croockewit obtained four specimens, most likely from the Pagetan and Pusan area in coastal South Kalimantan [c. 2°37'S, 115°10'E]. Galdikas *et al.* (1985) lists an unidentified cormorant species from "Danau Burung" (literally Bird Lake) at Tanjung Puting, coastal Central Kalimantan, a record that is discussed by Smythies and Davison (1999) under an entry for the Little Cormorant. The Little Black Shag has not been recorded in any of the ornithological surveys of larger wetland areas on the island (e.g., Danau Sentarum, West Kalimantan: van Balen 1996; van Balen and Dennis 2000; Negara river basin, South Kalimantan: van

Balen and Prentice 1997; Indonesian Wetland Database, L. Puspita, in litt. 2004). This paucity of records suggests that the species is not resident in Borneo (contra Harrison 1985), but is only present in small numbers during part of the year. The shags in Borneo, like the ones observed in Sumatra (MacKinnon *et al.* 1999), may originate from Java or from Sulawesi. Alternatively, the species is, or at one time has been, more common than the number of records suggest (note that Croockewit was able to secure four specimens on one collection trip) but surveys have not yet been conducted in the right areas.

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