

# Written Statement of Davy Hite

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Before the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Oversight Hearing: "Oversight of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act"  
March 4, 2026

## Introduction

Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this oversight hearing on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA).

My name is Davy Hite. I am an Army National Guard veteran, a Bass Fishing Hall of Famer, Bassmaster Classic Champion, and the co-host of *Bassmaster* television, a founding member of the South Carolina Boating and Fishing Alliance, and a current member of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Board. For more than thirty years, I have spent my life on America's lakes and rivers as a professional angler, conservation advocate, and communicator for millions of recreational anglers across the country.

I am here today to discuss an issue that reflects both the success of American conservation policy and the challenges that arise when recovery is not followed by practical, science-based management. That issue is the management of double-crested cormorants under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA).

I will note this testimony reflects my own experience on the water and is not a formal position of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. This testimony is grounded in what I have seen over decades as a fisherman, watching cormorant populations rebound across the country, from Michigan to Alabama, from California to my home state of South Carolina.

The MBTA has been highly successful in restoring migratory bird populations and serves as a shining example of sound conservation policy for the rest of the world. However, when a species successfully rebounds, conservation work often shifts from recovery to stewardship in many cases. That stewardship requires management tools to maintain balance across ecosystems, including our fisheries and habitats.

## The Migratory Bird Treaty Act as a Conservation Success Story

The MBTA stands as one of the most enduring and effective wildlife conservation laws in American history. It has helped reverse population declines of numerous migratory bird species that were once threatened by unregulated harvest, habitat loss, and chemical exposure.

The recovery of the double-crested cormorant is part of that success. Once in decline, cormorant populations rebounded significantly following federal protection and related conservation measures. Today, cormorants are widely distributed across North America and present in large numbers across all major migratory flyways.

That recovery deserves recognition. At the same time, conservation does not stop at recovery. It requires ongoing stewardship through active management in some cases, particularly when recovered populations begin to place significant pressure on other species, habitats, and public resources.

## **Four Decades of Change on America's Waters**

I began fishing competitively in the 1990s and have spent more than three decades fishing lakes, rivers, and reservoirs across the United States. As the host of Bassmaster television and a professional angler, I have visited waters nationwide and spoken with anglers, guides, fisheries biologists, and local communities about changes occurring on their home lakes and rivers.

Over that time, I have seen major shifts in fish populations, forage availability, habitat quality, and predator dynamics. In many inland freshwater systems, increased cormorant numbers have coincided with noticeable changes in fish recruitment and availability. These impacts are often most visible in confined waters where fish cannot easily disperse.

These observations are not simply anecdotal complaints. They reflect patterns recognized by state fisheries agencies and supported by research showing that localized concentrations of cormorants can affect fish populations and habitats.

## **Impacts to Recreational Fisheries and Conservation Funding**

Cormorants are highly efficient and opportunistic fish predators. Individual birds can consume up to eight fish per day, often totaling multiple pounds. When hundreds or thousands congregate on a single body of water, particularly during winter months, the cumulative predation pressure can be substantial.

Recreational fishing depends on healthy fish populations, including forage species and juvenile sportfish such as bass, crappie, and various species of bream. When these populations are suppressed, the effects ripple outward.

- Reduced angler participation
- Declines in license and excise tax revenue

- Less funding for fisheries management and conservation
- Economic losses for rural and coastal communities tied to outdoor recreation

Recreational anglers are a backbone of the conservation funding model in the United States. When access and opportunity decline as a result of ecological imbalance, conservation funding itself is affected.

## **South Carolina Case Study: The Santee Cooper Lakes**

Research conducted in South Carolina provides a clear example of how localized concentrations of cormorants can affect managed fisheries.

In 2008, Adam Kelley, a graduate researcher at Clemson University, conducted a study examining double-crested cormorant abundance and diet on the Santee Cooper reservoir system, which includes Lakes Marion and Moultrie. That study found that the birds examined contained an **average of approximately eight fish per bird in their digestive tracts**. During the wintering period, **the cormorant population on the lakes was estimated at roughly 6,000 birds, translating to an estimated consumption of about 48,000 fish per day**.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to place those findings in context. The study was conducted nearly two decades ago, during a severe drought when fish populations were already stressed, and when cormorant numbers were lower than they are today. Since that time, cormorant populations have continued to grow across much of the country, including in the Southeast. That means the level of predation documented in this study likely understates the pressure many fisheries experience today.

This matters because natural cormorant predation at that scale can overwhelm traditional fisheries management tools such as creel limits, size limits, and fish stocking programs. Those tools are designed to manage angler harvest, not sustained, high-density predation by a recovered species.

It is also important to note that these impacts are not limited to inland lakes and reservoirs. Cormorants feed heavily on inshore and near-coastal fish species in saltwater as well, placing additional pressure on estuarine systems that already face habitat loss, water quality challenges, and other environmental stressors.

This study highlights a broader reality. When species far exceed recovery goals at the continental level, unmanaged localized concentrations can have significant ecological impacts. In confined systems, concentrated predation can simply overwhelm fisheries management efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://open.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/461/](https://open.clemson.edu/all_theses/461/)

## **Habitat and Environmental Degradation**

Cormorant impacts extend beyond fish predation.

Large roosting and nesting colonies can deposit significant quantities of fecal material, increasing nitrogen and nitrate levels in soils and nearby waters. Over time, this nutrient loading can kill terrestrial vegetation, increase harmful algal blooms, destabilize shorelines, and alter island and riparian habitats.

I've seen complete islands disappear over the last thirty years from the impacts of the total takeover of cormorants.

In South Carolina and across the Southeast, formerly vegetated islands and shoreline areas have been stripped bare after sustained cormorant use. In some cases, islands have been so heavily impacted that they can no longer support vegetation or wildlife at all. These degraded habitats are less stable, contribute to water quality concerns, and are far less suitable for other bird species.

On Lake Murray in South Carolina, for example, cormorants are increasingly occupying islands that have traditionally served as nesting and roosting sites for purple martins. Those islands have long attracted birding enthusiasts from across the country and around the world. As cormorant use increases and vegetation declines, those traditional purple martin habitats are being displaced.

This is not simply a recreational fishing issue. It is an ecosystem-level challenge that affects fish, birds, vegetation, water quality, and the broader balance of our natural resources.

## **Legal and Regulatory Context After the 2016 Court Decision**

In 2016, a federal court vacated the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's depredation orders for double-crested cormorants. The court's decision did not dismiss the reality that cormorants can cause localized ecological and economic damage. Instead, it concluded that the prior framework lacked sufficient analysis regarding scope, cumulative impacts, and geographic application.

The practical result is that states lost a broad management tool that had previously allowed them to respond to documented, site-specific conflicts. The ruling did not say cormorant management was unnecessary. It indicated that a more refined and better supported framework was needed.

Since that time, state wildlife agencies have faced significant challenges addressing localized cormorant impacts, even in places where fisheries and habitat damage are well documented. This regulatory gap persists today.

## **Science Supports Targeted, Adaptive Management**

Scientific research from universities, state agencies, and federal analyses consistently shows that localized overabundance is a root cause for many of the ecological impacts.

Studies examining cormorant diet, movement, and population dynamics demonstrate that high-density concentrations can suppress fish recruitment, alter age structures, and degrade habitat. Impacts vary by location, season, and ecosystem. That is why one-size-fits-all management approaches do not work well in practice.

The clear goal is not seeking to eliminate cormorants or undo conservation successes. States are seeking science-based, targeted tools to address documented impacts when and where they occur while ensuring the long-term sustainability of cormorant populations.

## **The Importance of a Flyway-Based Management Framework**

Cormorants are migratory birds managed across flyways that span multiple states and ecosystems. Conditions within these flyways vary dramatically.

A reservoir in South Carolina is different from the Great Lakes, the prairie pothole region of the plains states, or the Puget Sound. Uniform national constraints fail to account for these realities.

Recognizing this, organizations such as the Mississippi Flyway Council have developed proposals for a flyway-based management framework for double-crested cormorants. This approach incorporates population abundance indices into management decisions while emphasizing regional coordination, population sustainability, cumulative impact analysis, and accountability. It is also responsive to the concerns raised in the 2016 court decision.

A flyway-based model, combined with appropriate state-level flexibility, would allow wildlife managers to respond to localized impacts, coordinate across jurisdictions, maintain overall population health, and preserve balance across interconnected ecosystems.

Adaptive management is standard practice for many wildlife species, including deer, turkeys, waterfowl, and fish. Migratory birds, like cormorants, should not be excluded from that principle when science supports action.

## **State Perspectives and Cooperative Wildlife Management**

State fish and wildlife agencies across the country have emphasized the importance of restoring practical management flexibility for cormorants. Organizations such as the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies provide a forum for states to coordinate science, policy, and best practices related to migratory bird management.

From a state perspective, the ultimate goal is to address documented, localized conflicts in a manner consistent with conservation principles, legal requirements, and regional ecological conditions.

## **The Role of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act Going Forward**

The MBTA remains a vital conservation framework, and its core protections should remain intact. At the same time, implementation should reflect modern ecological science and on-the-ground conditions.

Congress plays a key role in ensuring that conservation success is paired with adaptive management, that federal policy recognizes localized impacts, that states have appropriate tools to respond responsibly, and that cooperative federal-state wildlife management remains strong.

Oversight hearings like this one are important to ensuring that conservation laws remain effective, relevant, and balanced.

## **Conclusion**

The recovery of the double-crested cormorant is a conservation success story that reflects the strength of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Unmanaged success, however, has created unintended ecological consequences.

After more than thirty years on the water, I am confident that balanced, science-based management produces the best outcomes for fish, birds, habitats, and the people who fund and support conservation.

With thoughtful oversight and modernized implementation, the MBTA can continue to protect migratory birds while also preserving healthy fisheries, intact habitats, and the outdoor traditions that define so many American communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.