

The feathered fishers of Pen Ponds

By Nigel Jackman



The fish of Pen Ponds are preyed upon by cormorants, herons, great crested grebes, kingfishers, black-headed gulls, common terns and the occasional little egret. Their feeding habits change with their breeding cycle and with the seasons: fishing is severely curtailed by low temperatures and ice in winter. Currently the fish in Pen Ponds appear sufficient to sustain good numbers of fish eaters.

Cormorants eat mainly small fish between 5 and 15cm in length, but have been recorded eating fish of over 40cm and eels over 60cm long. Cormorants often meet their daily food requirements in a short time, and will then 'loaf' for the remainder of the day. An adult cormorant requires around 400g to 500g of food each day.

The diet of **grey herons** is more varied although fish, including carp, roach, pike and eel, is their most common food. An adult grey heron needs 300 to 500g of food a day and the size of fish it catches can vary from 3 to 55cm.

An adult **great crested grebe** (see back cover photo) may eat 200 to 350g of fish a day varying in size from 5 to 20cm. It dives underwater to search for prey and may remain underwater for up to 30 seconds. After spotting a fish, it accelerates in pursuit, twisting with the fish's every movement until it is close enough to strike with its bill. Fish caught underwater are gulped head-first at the surface.

Kingfishers must eat at least their own bodyweight (34 to 46g) of fish, insects and aquatic crustaceans and invertebrates every day. They prefer fish about 23mm long, but will cope with anything up to 80mm. A kingfisher dives into water with its beak opened, but its eye closed by a third eyelid, thus capturing its prey blind. The kingfisher will then return to its perch against which it will strike the fish to kill it before swallowing it head-first. A pair of kingfishers with a large brood of hungry youngsters can catch more than one hundred fish a day. A Kingfisher needs to eat at least 16 minnows a day to survive the winter, when mortality can be high.

Photo: Heron with pike at Lower Pen Pond by Charles Roscorla