

Anhinga

Anhinga anhinga

Water Turkey. Snakebird. Black Darter. American Darter. Anhinga. Whatever the common name, it's an *Anhinga anhinga*.

The Anhinga is a member of the darter family, *Anhingidae*, and is closely related to the Indian (*Anhinga melanogaster*), African (*Anhinga rufa*), and Australian (*Anhinga novae-hollandiae*) Darters.



further north than the Anhinga's.

The Anhinga preys primarily on fish, but its diet can also include aquatic invertebrates like Crayfish (*near left photo*) and insects. Although not a particularly fast swimmer, it is an effective aquatic hunter, re-

The name *snakebird* comes from its swimming nearly submerged with just its head and long, thin, curved neck exposed. *Water turkey* comes from the spread tail with a wide band at the tip like a turkey, seen when swimming and often seen in flight; *darter* refers to the way it captures prey by quickly spearing the fish with its sharp bill.

There is agreement that the name *Anhinga* comes from Tupí Indian, but there is disagreement about its meaning. James Jobling (*A Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names*) says it means devil bird or evil spirit of the woods, while Helmut Sick (*Birds in Brazil*) says that it means small head.

The Anhinga's range includes Mexico, Central America, Panama, Cuba, and the United States from North Carolina to Texas and south. Its range is limited by cool temperatures and low amounts of sunshine.

Anhingas prefer fresh water and coastal aquatic habitats that include shrub or tree-covered banks, islands or shores. These habitats include lakes, marshes, swamps, mangrove swamps, shallow coastal bays, and lagoons.

The Anhinga's head is small and appears to be an extension of its long neck. In this neck, the 8th and 9th cervical vertebrae create a hinge-like apparatus that allows the quick catching of prey. The long, sharp, serrated bill also aids in hunting. Although its shape is similar to that of a Cormorant, the hunting action of the head and neck is more like a heron.

The male Anhinga has brighter colors than the female. The male has greenish-black plumage overall, accentuated by silver-gray feathers on the upper back and wings. Females have a light brown head, neck, and chest. When breeding, the skin around the eye turns a bright turquoise color. Molting of all flight feathers at the same time renders it flightless for a while.

Anhingas don't have feathers that are waterproofed by oils like a duck's, nor it does have a layer of insulating body feathers like a Cormorant. When the Anhinga goes into the water, all of its feathers become completely wet, causing it to lose buoyancy. This allows it to dive easily and search for fish under the water. However, it also causes rapid heat loss, so Anhingas must spread their wings in the sun to warm up again.

Anhingas outwardly resemble Cormorants, but there are differences. The Cormorant is a more powerful swimmer and hunts faster swimming fish, while the Anhinga is much slower in the water and therefore hunts slower swimming fish. Anhingas soar but they need gliding flights from trees in order to start flight; the Cormorant is not able to soar but can easily take off from the water. The Anhinga's low metabolic rate causes it to chill rapidly, so it is limited to a southern range in North America; the Cormorant is able to maintain a higher body temperature and can deal with colder temperatures, so its range extends

lying on its quick neck and sharp bill to catch prey. It targets slower moving species of fish and stalks them underwater, finally striking out with its long neck and spearing the prey with its bill. It then brings the prey above water and jerks it off its bill, manipulating it in order to swallow the fish head first.

Unlike the Cormorant, the Anhinga has no economic impact because it does not eat fish that humans might eat.

Anhingas reach sexual maturity around two years of age and are monogamous. The nests are frequently placed within large mixed-species colonies of herons, egrets, and cormorants and are built of twigs and moss, lined with leaves and small twigs. They may be as low as five feet above the ground, or as high as 100 feet in tree tops.

Once the pair is formed, the male gathers nesting material while the female builds a platform nest, which is usually on a branch overhanging water or in open areas in the tops of trees. The female constructs the nest by weaving sticks together and padding it with live twigs and green leaves.

The highly territorial males defend threats to nesting territories with extensive displays and even fighting. If another male approaches the territory, the resident male spreads its wings and snaps its bill. If no retreat occurs, the two may peck at each other's heads and necks. Females are less aggressive but will defend the nest if necessary.