

# Life on the Li

— And the Cormorant Fisherman  
Of Graceful Guangxi

*Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett*

*At sunset on the Li near the village of Xingping, father, son and birds end their fishing day.*





At sunrise, on the Li River north of Xingping, a cormorant fisherman and partners head out for the day.

**F**ar from the hyperactive cities to the north, trekking the quiet countryside of southern China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region can be like strolling through a fantastical painting made real. And while boating along the

flowing source of life that runs through it, besides myriad other activities of the bipedal, four-legged and airborne variety, one can observe an appropriately remarkable mode of fishing.

In days long past, to attract fish the cor-

morant fishermen of the Li River would burn lamps of fire held on poles extended over the water. Today they use propane lanterns, but the practical and visual effects are nearly the same. When the man senses a potential catch below, the avian associate takes over, and as has occurred for hundreds of years on and in the sustaining waters of the Li, man and bird fish as partners.

In a flash the sleek cormorant is over the

side, down, shooting dart-like through the currents. Minutes later he (or she) surfaces and springs from the water to reassume a perch aboard the bamboo raft. While submerged, the bird may have snacked on one or two smaller fish, but it is the larger still bulging in his throat that will be on the family dinner table this evening.

It is said that a single athletically-proficient bird can feed an entire family. And in

return the birds are treated with respect and care. The job does not come without some indignities, however. A ring of cord around the neck prevents the swallowing of larger fish, and perhaps not every bird is pleased to have his long gullet probed, pumped and disgorged of his catch. But such is the nature of this partnership, and the cormorants seem to go with the flow.

Typically the fishing team consists of

three partners - a man and two birds. The birds spend most of their time perched upon their solitary posts at the bow and at the stern, respectively. The human stands midpoint, propelling the raft with a pole. If garbed in traditional manner, with a protective shoulder shroud jutting out at a sharp angle and wide hat, the man takes on a bird-like appearance in his assumed plumage. This writer can only speculate as to the

At work on the Li, north of Puyi Town, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region - July 2007







Readying the raft, while the winged partner awaits the new day.

original purpose of the unique uniform: The wide hat, to guard against the sun in the day; the wing-like shoulder protection, perhaps to ward off sparks when open torches were extended out over the water at night.

The cormorants, too, have their adapted

and very functional work wear. Unlike most water fowl, the feathers of the cormorant are not waterproof and do not hold air while diving. This enables the birds to shoot more quickly to the bottom of the river, where the big fish meander. This, too, is why the birds

so often strike a photogenic pose: While the sun rises over the mountains, perched on the bow of the boat, his wings extended (obliging the photographer), he dries his feathers.

Of course, less intriguing but perhaps more efficient modes of fishing are em-

ployed on the Li. If one kayaks some kilometers with the flow, for instance from the active tourist town of Yangshuo to the bucolic Puyi Town down south, one will come across not only cormorant fishermen, but also those of the hook, line and netting vari-

ety. Besides bamboo rafts, their craft range from a single inner tube moved by paddle to motor-driven skiffs.

Along the way, robust water buffalo bask in the shallows, and well-fed oxen graze on the green shorelines. The children

of riverside villages pause in their play to shout “helloooo” to the kayaking laowai. Birdlife is abundant and, besides the occasional laughing child, only the sounds of nature are heard. ■

Ready to Work – Li River, near Xingping.

