

COOPERATIVE FEEDING BY THREE UNRELATED TASMANIAN BIRD SPECIES?

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The afternoon was sunny but cool and the tide was high but still incoming as we wandered along the beach-side pathway at Georges Bay St Helens recently. We were in no hurry and content to stop and observe when our attention was attracted by an unlikely trio foraging on the calm water 25 metres from us. The group consisted of one each of the following: little pied cormorant *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*, Australian pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, and silver gull *Larus novaehollandiae*. This trio were engaged in what appeared to be cooperative feeding. The behaviour was observed for some ten minutes and consistently followed an identical pattern. As the cormorant submerged, the pelican plunged its head beneath the surface and swam a short distance towards where in due course the cormorant re-appeared. As the pelican's head emerged from the water, the gull swiftly approached, taking food from the water's surface and even pecking at morsels protruding from the massive bill. As we observed the party a passing silver gull attempted to join in and was immediately set upon by the resident gull that successfully chased the intruder off before resuming its part in the avian *ménage à trois*. Whether or not the behaviour was intentional and of benefit to all remains a mystery, however, the pelican and the gull were certainly profiting from the activity of the diving cormorant and fed successfully on each occasion that we observed. They were still feeding together when at length we resumed our walk, but were nowhere to be seen on our return journey 30 minutes later.