

## Oriental Darter

The Oriental darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*) is a South Asian and Southeast Asian water bird. It has a lengthy, slender neck and a straight, sharp beak, and it feeds for fish while immersed in water, similar to the cormorant. It spears a fish underneath the water, brings it to the surface, tosses and juggles it, then swallows it head first. The body stays submerged when swimming, leaving only the slender neck exposed just above the water, earning it the nickname snakebird. It has wettable plumage like cormorants and is frequently seen resting on a rock or twig with its wings spread open to dry. The topic has a very high chance of being asked as a UPSC Prelims Environment and Ecology Question or as a Current Affairs Question, as it has been in the news recently.

### About Oriental Darter

#### Taxonomy

The Oriental darter belongs to the Anhingidae family of darters, and is linked to American (*Anhinga anhinga*), African (*Anhinga rufa*, including *vulsini* of Madagascar as nothing more than a subspecies), as well as Australasian (*Anhinga novaehollandiae*) darters. These were once thought to be *Anhinga melanogaster* subspecies. The white lateral neck band distinguishes the Oriental darter with American darters.

#### Physical Features

The Oriental darter is just a waterbirds species with a long neck, just like all the other aningas. The neck structure is similar to that of other darter species, with well-developed muscles. The adult plumage is dark, with silvery streaks running down the shaft of the wing coverts and tertials. The crown and neck are brown, with the back of the neck turning black. The underbelly is of dark brown colour. It has a striped look due to a pale line across the eye and throat, as well as a line extending along the sides of the neck. The iris is yellow with a golden ring around it (brighter yellow in breeding birds).

The upper jaw has a dark tip with a pale brown base, while the bottom mandible is yellowish. Immatures and non-breeding birds have yellow legs and webbing on their feet, but mating birds have dark grey tarsi as well as toes of yellow webbing. Adult females do have shorter beaks and a wide buff band that runs from the bottom of the neck up to the shoulder that separates the black just at base of the neck and breast from the rear neck. This pattern can also be seen in immatures with a lighter neck and an absence of long pointed scapulars. The long slender neck, large wing, and wedge-shaped tail distinguish it in flight.

#### Behaviour and Ecology

Oriental darters are primarily found in freshwater rivers and ponds. They normally hunt alone, submerging their entire body and swimming slowly ahead with their webbed feet while jerkily moving their head and neck just above the water. They establish a stick structure on the nesting tree, that is typically surrounded by water, in multispecies heronries. Multiple pairs might nest in close proximity. Northern India's mating season is from June to August (during the monsoon season), southwestern India's is from April to May, and southeastern India's is in winter (during the northeast monsoon). Three to six spindle-shaped bluish-green eggs with some white chalky cover that becomes dirty with time make up a typical clutch. Both parents start incubating the eggs after the first one is laid, resulting in

asynchronous hatching.

