

# Artifact of the Month

Tribal Historic Preservation Office

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Known for spreading their wings to dry them alongside lakes and river banks, the Anhinga and Double-Crested Cormorant are most often confused for each other as they tend to be found in similar habitats. Upon closer look, ornithologists have distinguished the species from each other by bill shape (Cormorants are curved and Anhinga are straight), coloring on feathers, and even eye color. But what if we were to delve even further? In 2012 the collections team catalogued the above bone as a bird bone, specifically a tarsometatarsus with a question mark as to its genus and species. Fortunately for researchers, the variations that appear on the external bodies of the birds can also be found skeletally.

The tarsometatarsus is a bone that is unique to birds and is the combination of metatarsal bones, which in humans are spread out to help create our feet and individual toes. The two ends of the bone are very specific and while unfortunately only a portion of this bone was found intact, it is enough to determine which species it belongs to. The Double-Crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) has distinctive splaying of three prongs at the base of its tarsometatarsus (the part that connects to the phalanges) while the Anhinga has very little splaying of the three prongs. This extreme splaying could in fact have to do with the Cormorant's better ability to hunt underwater with its webbed feet, chasing after their prey through the water. Knowing the difference between the two species is helpful in establishing the archaeological context of a site and assessing the food gathering strategies of a population.

