



Waiting for the next fishing boat
to arrive at the city marina



It helps to have a long, flexible neck
for preening – upside down!

Brunswick Wildlife

Brown Pelican: Back from the Brink

For the young folks and those new to coastal living, it is hard to imagine a beach without Brown Pelicans flying in formation, riding the updraft from waves or plunge diving for fish. Familiar sights today, however, in the 1970's pelicans were on the fast track to extinction.

The main cause was a byproduct of DDT which caused pelicans and many other species to lay eggs with thin shells that often broke under the weight of incubating adults. It was particularly destructive for pelicans since they incubate their eggs using their large webbed feet.

The pelican population crashed in the 1960's and 1970's. Since the banning of DDT in 1972 and the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, numerous species, including the Bald Eagle, Osprey, along with the Brown Pelican have made dramatic comebacks.

Pelicans were officially designated endangered in 1973. Reproduction improved and pelican numbers began to increase. Their recovery was very successful! The Brown Pelican was removed from the Endangered Species List in 1985 and their numbers were restored to historical levels along the Gulf Coast by the late 1990s.

Today pelicans are numerous around the coast of the United States from Maryland to Washington State and some inland sights such as the Salton Sea. Just watch the docks around the Southport Marina for their display of beauty and numbers.

Brown Pelicans nest on protected islands such as the spoil islands in the Cape Fear River and cohabitate with other colonial nesting species such as Royal Tern and Laughing Gull. They are very social birds throughout then year, flying and roosting in small groups of six to twenty; however, the flocks sometimes exceed a hundred.

Pelicans are usually residents; however, some are partial migrants. On the East Coast they breed from the Virginia/Maryland coast in the Chesapeake Bay area south to Florida. After breeding they disperse northward. Those from the northern part of their range then shift southward for the winter, returning in February to nest.

In our region, pelicans may be found year round but their numbers increase rapidly as birds return for from the south to breed.

These large birds are easily recognizable. In breeding plumage the back of their neck is dark chestnut, giving them their name. They lift out of the water without the running typical of large birds like swans and fly in a V-formation that undulates up and down like a wave. Note which bird is first to stop beating its wing and glide and which bird is the first to start beating again. Their flying formation provides a great example of “drafting”

With webbing between all four toes, Brown Pelicans are strong swimmers but awkward walkers. In flight, however, pelicans really excel. Their long wings gracefully carry them to and from fishing grounds in that V-formation close to the water or by soaring high overhead to take advantage of thermals.

Pelicans are also easily recognized by their huge bill with its expandable gular pouch. The pouch, however, is not for storage since pelicans usually swallow their catch immediately. They stretch their pouch often to keep the skin flexible. Look for one stretching its bill straight up to the sky.

Of the world’s seven pelican species, only the Brown Pelican feeds by plunge-diving. It begins with a steep dive, from as high as 65 feet, crashing into the water head first. Its wings are tightly folded. Though the bird creates a huge splash, its body does not entirely go under. Once the water settles, the pelican can be seen sitting quietly on the water, pulling up its pouch as the water pours out leaving their catch.

Brown Pelicans breed at two to five years of age. They are long-lived, enjoying a successful annual survival rate of up to 80%. Some live to be more than twenty years.

They are believed to be monogamous for a given breeding season. The nest is a scrape nest in a mound on the sand or a stick nest in a tree. The clutch is usually three eggs that hatch in approximately thirty days.

Both parents care for the young. Chicks are fed small predigested fish, regurgitated onto bottom of the nest. By three to four weeks of age, young chicks are large enough to swallow

fish whole. They force their parents to disgorge fish by thrusting their bills into their parents' throats.

After a month or so the chicks gather close together (in tight groups called crèches) to conserve body heat and provide additional protection from predators. They fledge in nine to twelve weeks.

I need to mention that if you moved or are visiting from the Midwest or Gulf Coast you are not unfamiliar with pelicans. This is the range of the American White Pelican, a significantly larger cousin of the Brown Pelican. Their wingspan is approximately 108 inches compared to about 84 inches for the Brown Pelican.

During the winter and migrations watch for American White Pelicans since a few are usually spotted in Brunswick County. I photographed three flying over Southport in 2007. You will not see that photo in this space. By the time I got out of my truck and aimed, I only got feet and tail feathers.

John Ennis



Strong, graceful in flight, soaring, and gliding, the Brown Pelican has an 84-inch wingspan. Also, its four webbed toes make it a strong swimmer