

BROWN PELICAN

Pelecanus occidentalis



The Decline of Pelicans: During the late 19th and early 20th centuries pelicans were hunted for their feathers to be used in hats for women. The Migratory Bird Act of 1918 was enacted to prevent the illegal killing of pelicans and other birds. The greatest decline of the brown pelican population started in the 1940's when DDT started to be heavily used. The pelican population in the gulf region was heavily impacted out, but the Louisiana population was completely wiped out. In 1970, under a law that preceded the endangered species act of 1973, they were listed as endangered. Once the use of DDT was banned in 1972 pelicans were able to repopulate to stable numbers from breeding pairs brought in from other states. The brown pelican was taken off the list in the 1980's.



Interesting Facts: Brown Pelicans are the smallest of the 7 pelican species. Their bill pouches hold more than their stomach (3 gallons vs. 1 gallon, respectively). The brown pelican's good eyesight makes them the only pelican species that can see and dive for food from up to 60 feet in the air.

State Bird: The Brown Pelican became Louisiana's state bird in 1966. It has been said that European settlers liked the pelicans nurturing manner towards their young and hence they became a symbol for the state. Louisiana's nickname is "The Pelican State". The pelican is featured on the state flag, state seal, and on the U.S. Mint's Bicentennial quarter.

Habitat: Brown pelicans have a very wide distribution range. They are found from Nova Scotia to Venezuela on the Atlantic Coast; from British Columbia to Chile on the Pacific Coast; on the Galapagos Islands and along the Gulf Coast. They are strictly found in marine habitats such as salt marshes, beaches, lagoons, bays, and mangrove forests.

Food Sources: Pelicans eat mainly fish like menhaden, herring, mullet, and sheepshead. They also eat some crustaceans and are known to wait for handouts from fisherman.

Behavior: Pelicans are very sociable and tend to congregate in large groups. They are fantastic flyers but not so good at swimming. They are normally seen flying gracefully just above the water in straight line or v-formation patterns. They regularly dive for their food catching fish in their large bill, draining the excess water before swallowing fish whole. Females lay 1-3 eggs from March to May. Both parents incubate eggs till they hatch. Parents will feed their chicks by regurgitating previously consumed fish. Pelicans will remain monogamous for the breeding season.

References:

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