

The Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

Ranger Jim Serpa

The Brown Pelican found along our coastline is the smallest of the world's eight pelican species. It averages four feet tall with a wingspan of up to seven and a half feet, not exactly lilliputian by any standard! The Brown Pelican also distinguishes itself from other pelicans because of its method of feeding, which is by diving. All other pelicans feed from the surface. It's a sight to behold; watching these gangly looking birds dive bomb directly down from heights as great as 75 feet to feed exclusively on marine fish.

The Brown Pelican is the politically correct bird for the 90's because unlike many of its feathered brethren, both females and males alike have identical coloration. Adults have a white head and neck, brown grey body and wings with a black belly. Juveniles tend to be mostly brown except for a white belly and some white at the base of the neck.



The famous pouch, attached to the bottom part of the pelican's bill, lacks feathers. People in the know believe this keeps the bird cool. Also, the pelican uses the pouch only to catch its meals; not to store them as some people believe.

Breeding along our coastline occurs on the Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara where the pelican nests on the ground. The nestlings are fed freshly caught fish regurgitated by the parents onto the nest floor. As the nestlings mature, they are fed regurgitated meals directly from the parents' pouch. These feather-poor babies often sqawk up a storm, possibly sensing it's their last chance.

As adults, the Brown Pelican is the Marcel Marceau of the bird world, never uttering a sound, although it does possess an elaborate display repertoire.

The Brown Pelican can be found from the Canadian border to South America on the West Coast and from North Carolina to the West Indies on the East Coast, including the entire Gulf of Mexico region.

This incredible bird we now take for granted was not always so plentiful. Only 25 years ago these pelicans were not hatching any young. With their populations dipping to near extinction levels, they were placed in protected status. After careful study it was found that the pelicans had alarmingly high levels of a pesticide called DDT in their systems.

The DDT had made its way down river to the oceans as runoff from agricultural areas and had worked itself up through the marine chain, and finally into the pelicans through the fish consumed. The DDT was blocking sufficient calcium formation so completely that the eggs were far too fragile to be incubated; i.e. smashed eggs! Fortunately for us, the banning of DDT in 1972 has helped to allow the pelicans to have year after year of successful births, bringing back the population numbers to acceptable levels.

In a way, the pelicans acted as a barometer of the environment to show us humans just how badly we were affecting the world by our shortsighted application of pesticides. What a pity it would have been for us at Doheny and everyone else on both coasts if we couldn't marvel at these stately birds flying in that classic "V" formation on a layer of air just inches from the water, defying the swells to alter their course.