

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Brown Pelicans may be found year-round in Florida. This bird is instantly recognizable by its large body, long bill, and enormous gular pouch. They are approximately 48 inches long, have a wing-span of 6-7 feet, and weigh about 8 pounds. You may find them resting on posts, panhandling near fishermen, or gracefully gliding in a group single file just above the water. A unique thing: they have webbing between all 4 toes on each foot. This makes a strong swimmer; however, makes it very awkward to walk. In wild, average lifespan is 15 years, with a record at 43 years old.

They are noted for their spectacular head-first dives to trap unsuspecting fish in their expandable pouches. Brown Pelicans usually feed on bait fish that are near the water's surface. One of their favorite is menhaden (type of herring), but will feed on whatever is most available. The Brown Pelican is the only Pelican that dives for its food head-first.

Adults look similar, with males being slightly larger than females. They have short, dark legs and webbed feet. In non-breeding, the neck and head are white; the huge bill is paler at the base and tipped with yellow. Most of the year, Brown Pelicans are drab in their gray-brown and white plumage, and have brown eyes. At the beginning of the nesting season the plumage of the Pelicans undergoes amazing changes. As Brown Pelicans begin courtship and nest building, their heads become bright yellow and their necks as white as old bone. At some point when going into breeding the iris turns a coffee-cream white and the skin around their eyes turns a bright reddish-pink. Later, their necks and breasts turn deep rich brown below their yellow cap. After breeding, they molt and start all over again! Because breeding time is different in each area of Florida, there is no set "overall" season or month to connect plumage changes.

Although many migrate, some stay year-round in our area. Banding records suggest that Florida is an important nursery ground for Pelicans from other states (Williams 1972). Brown Pelicans are highly social year-round. In South Florida, nesting usually begins in the fall months. In our area, Brown Pelicans nest primarily on mangrove islands, where they are free from disturbance and predation by terrestrial mammals, including humans. Colonies may be from a dozen pair to several hundred pair. Nests are typically little more than a shallow depression built from grass or reeds, over interwoven sticks on supporting tree branches. From 2-4 white eggs are incubated under the parents' foot webs for nearly a month. Both parents feed their young predigested fish. Chicks are born without feathers and are pinkish in color; by 3 weeks they have white down; by 4 weeks they have brown feathers coming in on their back in the shape of a heart; between weeks 5-9 the white is replaced by brown all over; upon fledging at about 12 weeks the color is medium brown with the breast/belly white, all feathers are new and it is very easy to identify—looking almost like sculpted fabric. **Caution: When boating or jet skiing, be sure to stay well away from nesting sites. If spooked, adults will abandon the nests with the young still in the nests.**



**Brown Pelican** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)



Help pelicans stay wild by **not** feeding fish or other food to them. Fish scraps from filleting fish often include large bones that can scratch, poke holes in, or get stuck in the throat of a pelican and can cause the birds to get sick, or sometimes even choke or starve. Feeding pelicans can even lead to situations where pelicans become aggressive, stealing fish from lines, and flying off with trailing fishing line that can ultimately lead to death. Check out <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu/SeaGrant/pubs/PelicanPub.pdf> to see how to unhook a pelican. Also check <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu/SeaGrant/video/Pelican/index.html> for a short video entitled *A Pelican's View*.

John James Audubon said the pelican is "one of the most interesting of our American birds" and described their feeding habits: *Look at them as they fly over the bay; listen to the sound of the splash they make as they drive their open bills, like a pock-net, into the sea, to scoop up their prey; mark how they follow that shoal of porpoises, and snatch up the frightened fishes that strive to escape from them. Down they go, again and again. What voracious creatures they are!*