May 1991

Nebraska Fauna: American White Pelican

Paul A. Johnsgard
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/biosciornithology

Part of the Ornithology Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/biosciornithology/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Papers in the Biological Sciences at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Ornithology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Few birds are more familiar to the average person than are white pelicans, but few Nebraskans also realize that thousands of these birds migrate through the state every year, and hundreds stop over to spend the summer on some of our larger lakes and reservoirs. No pelicans breed in Nebraska, but the nearest breeding area is only a short distance north of us, at LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge, near Martell, South Dakota. Since it requires three—or more probably four—years for white pelicans to become sexually mature, many of the immature birds simply stop off in Nebraska rather than completing their migrations to the Dakotas or the prairie provinces of central Canada, and spend a leisurely summer fishing in such reservoirs as Lake McConaughy or the deeper Sandhills lakes that support good populations of fish.

Although pelicans may appear somewhat comical—even grotesque—when observed at close range, they are masters of aerial precision, and are among the heaviest of all birds able to soar endlessly on the thermal updrafts that develop over the prairies on warm summer days. Then they wheel about in graceful slow-motion, their white plumage alternately shaded and exposed to the sun as they make their great forays in the sky, presenting a hypnotizing and unforgettable spectacle. With their contrasting black wingtips, the birds might be directed, thus diverting them from the head region.

From the time of hatching until fledging, probably at least three months, the young are dependent upon their parent's food. Within hours after hatching their first chick, the parents begin feeding it by regurgitating semi-digested food. Within a week or two after hatching, the young birds begin to insert their entire heads and necks into an adult's enormous throat-pouch, and obtain their food directly as soon as it is regurgitated by the parent. Although two chicks are normally hatched by pelicans, they usually hatch two or three days apart, and the chick hatched from the first-laid egg is thus older and stronger than its younger sibling. This difference may mean that the younger chick is unable to compete for food effectively, especially when food is limited.

As the chicks grow older and stronger, they often begin to wander away from the nests and mingle with other unfledged young. These groups of still-dependent young are often called "nurseries" or "creches," although they are not specifically cared for or guarded by any adults. However, when parents return to the colony they seek out and will feed only their own young, somehow selecting from the group of begging youngsters their own individual chick or chicks, presumably by using visual or vocal clues.

Like that of many other fish-eating bird species, the fertility and reproductive success of American white pelicans suffered greatly during the hard-pesticide era, and some colonies were effectively eliminated. However, surveys taken in the United States and Canada during the 1980s indicate that the population has effectively recovered, and by the early 1980s there were probably about 45,000 breeding birds in 19 American colonies and around 65,000 in 36 Canadian colonies. This represents a very substantial increase since the 1960s, and doesn't include immature non-breeders, which may well represent a comparable total, so that perhaps around 200,000 American white pelicans now exist.