

Conservation Corner

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October 18, 2017

Recently the *Fort Dodge Messenger* featured the story of a pelican that had become stranded in Fort Dodge. Luckily the pelican was uninjured, just unable to take off within the confines of the fenced backyard, and Webster CCB successfully relocated the pelican to Kennedy Lake. And while we don't think of pelicans as everyday backyard birds, they are becoming more common in our area, especially during migration, and so the American White Pelican will be this week's bird friend.

Pelicans are members of the Order Pelecaniformes along with the African shoebills and hamerkops as well as ibises, spoonbills, herons, and bitterns. North America is home to two of the eight pelican species that are found worldwide. Brown Pelicans live along the coastal waters of the United States and Mexico while American White Pelicans call inland wetlands, lakes, and rivers home. Their summer range reaches across the Midwest into Canada, and most of them will overwinter in the Deep South and Mexico. Hundreds of pelicans will spend the summer on Iowa Wetlands, including Sunken Grove and Little Clear Lake here in Pocahontas County.

Pelicans are huge water birds known for their long, flat bills and large throat pouches that they use as dip nets. They are among our largest flying birds, standing 4 feet high and weighing up to 30 pounds. At up to 10 feet, they also have the longest wingspan of any North American bird, second only to the California Condor. Unlike the Brown Pelicans, who dive for a living, American White Pelicans scoop up dinner while swimming. Groups of white pelicans will drive schools of minnows, carp, and suckers into the shallows for easy pickings. However, pelicans must first drain their pouches of water before swallowing said dinner, leaving their catch exposed and easy pickings for other birds.

Pelicans nest in large colonies. Both parents will help incubate the 2-3 eggs, often on or below their feet. Usually only one chick will survive, consuming about 150 pounds of fish before leaving the nest to forage on its own.

Pelicans are easily recognized in ancient stone reliefs. In Egypt, pelicans were associated with death and the afterlife and were also pictured as a protective symbol against snakes. Did you know Alcatraz Island is named after the Brown Pelicans that nest there? The Spanish word *Alcatraz* derives from the Arabic word *al-caduos*, meaning a water-carrying vessel, in this case the pelican's pouch.

Pelican numbers have been steadily increasing since the DDT crisis of the 1960s when many pelicans were poisoned by eating fish with high concentrations of the now banned insecticide. Today's challenges include continued loss of habitat due to widespread draining of wetlands, oil spills, and human interference.

I'll close with a familiar limerick written by Dixon Lanier Merritt in 1910.

A wonderful bird is the pelican
His bill can hold more than his belican
He can take in his beak
Food enough for a week
But I'm damned if I see how the helican

