

BIRDS

Status: Native Summer Resident

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

(*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

Description

The genus name, *Pelecanus*, is Latin for pelican. The species name is from Greek and refers to the bird's bill; *erythros*, red and *rhynchos*, beak. The American white pelican is a large, heavy water bird with a massive bill and huge throat pouch that it uses as a dip net to catch fish. Hence the saying, "What a wonderful bird is the pelican, his beak can hold more than his belly can."**

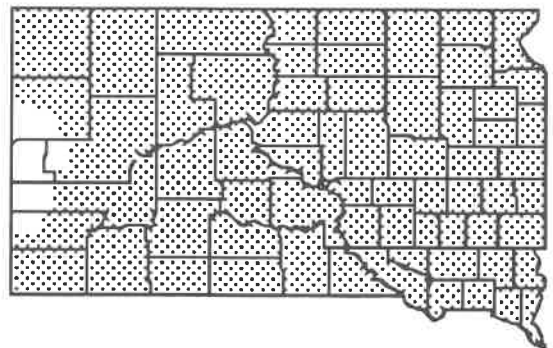
The American white pelican, one of the heaviest birds capable of flight, is strangely proportioned with comically short legs for the size of its body. Adults can weigh as much as 10 to 17 pounds (4.5-7.7 kg). Because of their large bodies and short legs, pelicans are far better swimmers than walkers. The American white pelican has a wing span of 9 feet (2.8 m). This species is mostly white, except for black wing tips. Males and females are similar in appearance.

The bird's large, bright orange bill makes this species easy to identify. During the breeding season, both males and females develop a 3 inch by 3 inch (7.6 by 7.6 cm) bump on the top of their large beak. This conspicuous growth, which evidently indicates the bird's interest in breeding, is shed by the end of the breeding season.



Distribution

The American white pelican is a common summer resident over most of the state of South Dakota, with the exception of the Black Hills. The pelican winters along the Gulf of Mexico and in southern California and further south into Mexico and Central America.



Natural History

The American white pelican is found on large bodies of water, where it nests on small islands and sandbars with gentle slopes. Most white pelicans return to the state in early April, although some early migrants arrive in late March. Nesting occurs from May through August. The nest is on the ground, with a scraped rim of dirt or sand along with some rubbish of stems, wood bits, and other debris. Females usually lay 2 dull, white eggs per nest. Incubation lasts about 30 days. Both parents participate in this duty. The pelican is a colonial nester, often found in large colonies with several other water bird species. A 1987 survey of Bitter and Waubay lakes in Day County recorded 3,265 active white pelican nests. Pelicans begin leaving South Dakota in the fall during mid-September, with most of the birds gone from the state by the end of October.

Pelicans feed mostly on fish, although they are known to eat crayfish and salamanders as well. A pelican cannot dive. It swims on the water surface and submerges its head to catch fish. Once its pouch is filled with fish and water, the pelican expels the water and swallows the fish. An adult requires about 3 pounds (1.4 kg) of fish, mostly carp, chub and perch, each day. Occasionally, a group of pelicans will fish cooperatively by forming an irregular line as they move through the water. A fish that escapes one of the birds is likely to swim into the beak of another. This is one of only a few known examples of coordinated hunting among birds. Young are fed by *regurgitation*.

Conservation Measures

Pelicans are protected by state and federal law. It is illegal to harm the adults or disturb their nests.

Glossary

Regurgitation - the returning of partially digested food from the stomach back up into the mouth.

References

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- ** From a poem by Dixon Lanier Merritt written in 1910.

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Publication of the *American White Pelican* fact sheet was funded by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD.