

## Articles

### Pelicans Nesting on Lake Nipigon

by  
Susan Bryan

On 17 June 1991, three nests of the American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) were discovered on Pretty Island in Lake Nipigon, Thunder Bay District (see Map 1). Until now, Ontario's only known pelican nest site has been on Lake of the Woods near the Manitoba border (Godfrey 1986, Theberge 1989). With the discovery of this new location on Lake Nipigon, the known breeding range of the American White Pelican in North America is extended 500 km to the east.

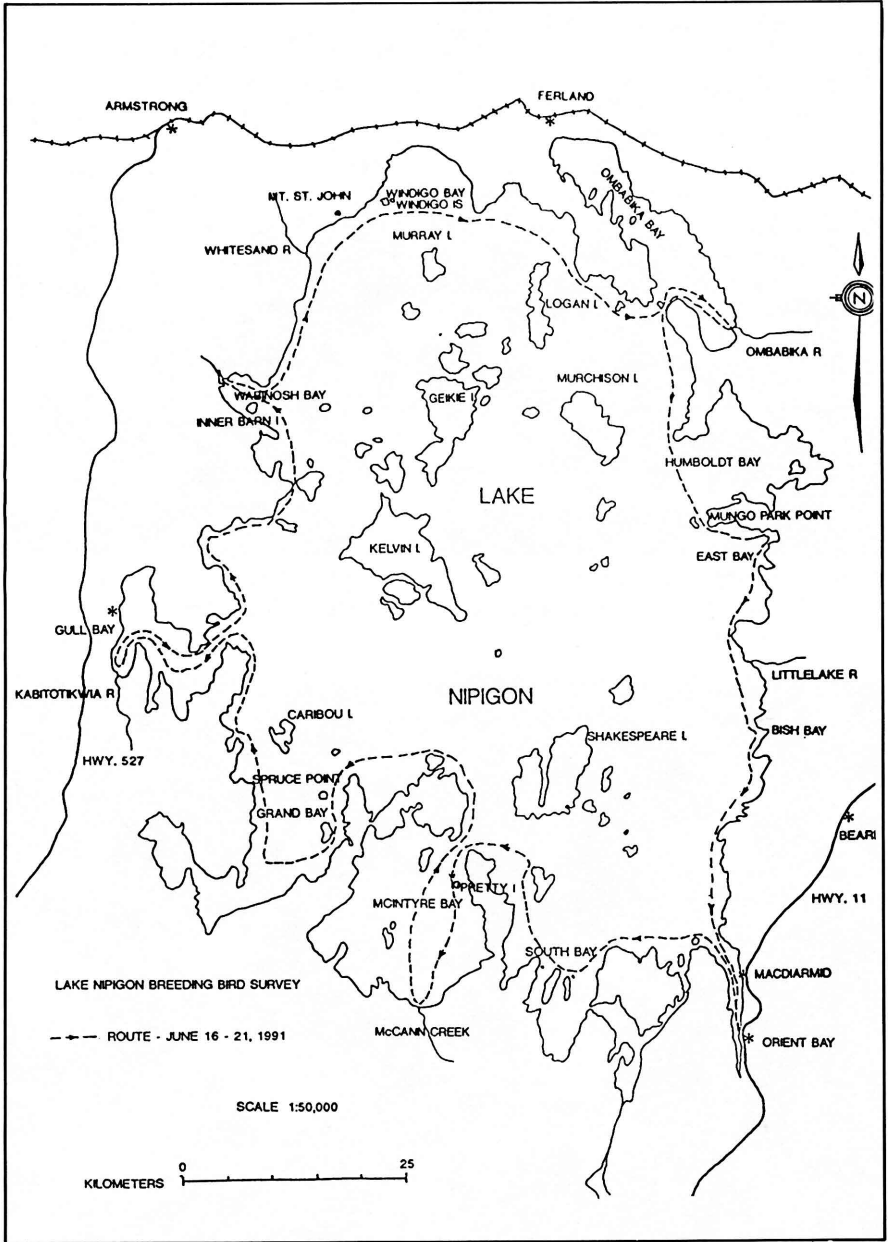
The pelicans were observed by a group of six birders (Mike Bryan, Dave Elder, Nick Escott, Myra McCormick, George Williams, and the author). The group was on a five day birding expedition circumnavigating Lake Nipigon.

On 17 June, the second day of our voyage, we approached Pretty Island in McIntyre Bay (Figure 1). The island is about 2 km from the nearest mainland shore. It is a raised, largely bare, rocky island measuring about 8 m by 15 m. On the higher ground, among large squared boulders, are patches of thin bare soil. Still standing in this soil are some small, dead, deciduous trees and bushes, now quite bare of foliage. As we approached, a number of Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) and Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) flew up from

the rock. Sitting on the highest part of the island were three unmistakable American White Pelicans.

As we approached more closely, the pelicans took flight, circling together around the island. All three birds displayed the typical adult plumage of the American White Pelican. One of the birds had a noticeable orange fibrous plate protruding like a keel on the upper mandible (characteristic of a breeding adult). The other two birds lacked this keel. All three birds showed black discoloration on top of the head. This black discoloration is characteristic of adults which are feeding young (Figure 2).

We went ashore and proceeded to the spot from which we had seen the pelicans take off. This was on the highest part of the island, on a flat patch of spongy soil between a few squared boulders. Here we found three large circular nests, two or three times the diameter of the numerous Herring Gull nests elsewhere on the island (Figure 3). We estimated the nest rim diameter at approximately 50 cm. The nests were nothing more than shallow depressions in the soil with a slightly raised rim of dirt. In two of the nests there were eggs -- two large white eggs, heavily nest-stained, in each. The third nest was of the same size and appearance, but contained no



Map 1: Lake Nipigon Breeding Bird Survey Route, 16-21 June 1991.  
Map drawn by *David H. Elder*.

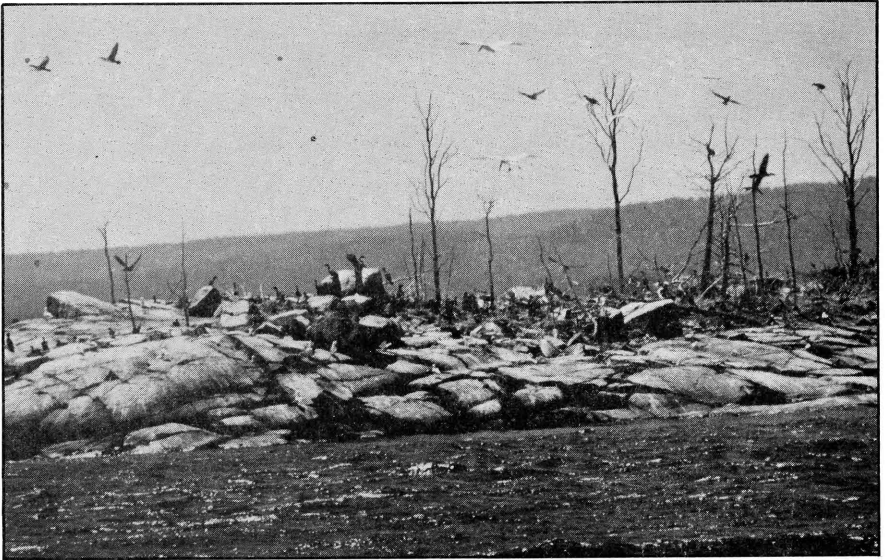


Figure 1: Pretty Island, McIntyre Bay, Lake Nipigon. Three American White Pelican nests were discovered here. Photo by *Susan Bryan*.



Figure 2: Adult American White Pelican flying with Double-crested Cormorants. Photo by *Susan Bryan*.

eggs. The three nests were close together, about a half metre of bare soil between them.

These three nests were quite different from the numerous Herring Gull and Double-crested Cormorant nests elsewhere on the island. There were approximately 50 Herring Gull nests (sparsely lined depressions on the bare rock with heaped up edges of moss and lichen) generally located lower on the island, near the water line. These nests contained brownish eggs with irregular dark brown splotches, and some downy chicks. Higher up on the rocks were approximately 100 heaped up stick nests containing the pale greenish-blue eggs of the Double-crested Cormorants. The nests of these two species were much smaller and of completely different construction than the pelican nests. Their egg size

and coloration were also completely different.

During the remainder of the expedition, we sighted pelicans on three other occasions. Later on the same day, 17 June, at Krug Bay west of Mooney Point in McIntyre Bay, a further 11 pelicans were seen. There was no evidence of nesting at this site, and the birds seen were in non-breeding adult plumage (that is, no fibrous plate on the upper mandible, and no black on top of the head). Two days later, on 19 June, near the Whitesand River mouth, a group of seven American White Pelicans was seen soaring in a westerly direction over the northern part of the lake. Later that same day, on a small rocky island in Windigo Bay, nine pelicans in non-breeding adult plumage were seen. No nests were observed here. This brought the total to 30 pelicans



Figure 3: One of three American White Pelican nests discovered on Pretty Island, Lake Nipigon. Photo by *Susan Bryan*.

seen during the expedition.

A previous breeding bird survey of Lake Nipigon, completed by L.L. Snyder (1928) during the summers of 1923/24, noted no pelicans on the

lake during four months of field work. The first known sighting of pelicans on Lake Nipigon was 12 years ago. Following is a listing of known pelican sightings on the lake:

June of 1979	12 pelicans	Ombabika R. mouth	Mr. & Mrs. C. Sutherland
summers 1980-91	pelicans	Ombabika R. mouth	Mr. & Mrs. C. Sutherland
summer, 1984	pelicans	Windigo Bay	F. Hardy
10 July 1989	3 pelicans	Windigo Island	A. Brennan
16 July 1990	1 pelican	Mooney Point,	P. Odorizzi
		McIntyre Bay	R. Swainson
17 July 1990	2 pelicans	McIntyre Bay	R. Swainson
			R. Hartley
18 June 1991	4 pelicans	Ombabika R. mouth	R. Kushnier
2 July 1991	2 pelicans (both with keel)	Ombabika R. mouth	R. Kushnier
3 July 1991	14 pelicans flying	Ombabika R. mouth	R. Kushnier

The first recorded nesting of American White Pelicans in Ontario was in 1938 (Peck 1987) when eight pairs nested on Dream Island in Lake of the Woods (at that time, the easternmost colony in North America). Today, over 6500 pairs nest there. The Lake Nipigon colony is obviously very much in its infancy. It will be interesting to see if it grows in a similar fashion over the next fifty years.

### Acknowledgements

This expedition was generously funded by a grant from the Community Wildlife Involvement Program of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and by the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund of the Long Point Bird Observatory through funds provided to the Ontario Rare Breeding Bird Program. Many thanks to the Nipigon District Office of the Ministry of Natural Resources for their help with finding historical data.

Thank you, also, to the birders from the Thunder Bay Field Naturalists Club who conducted the field work. Thanks to Capt. Paul Odorizzi for bringing us all home safely and so comfortably on his boat. Special thanks to Dr. N.G. Escott for help in all aspects of the trip, and particularly for his help in preparing this article.

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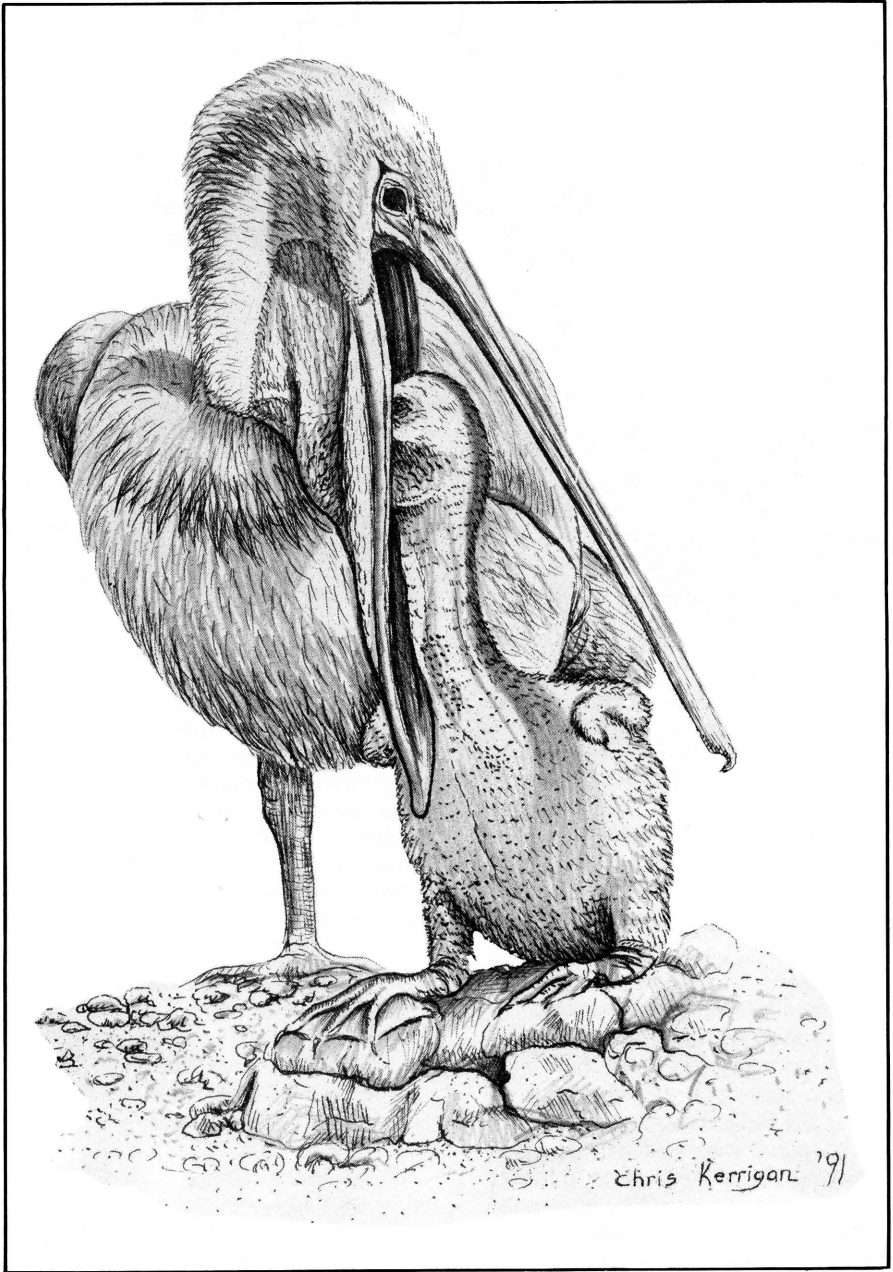


Figure 4: Adult American White Pelican feeding young. Drawing by *Chris Kerrigan*.