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## AMONG THE PELICANS

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WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

TWO species of pelicans are found on the Pacific Coast, the white (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*), and the Brown (*Pelecanus californicus*). The brown pelican is one of the commonest fishers on the southern California sea-coast, while the white pelican is a bird of the interior. On the Coronado Islands the brown pelican nests abundantly and from this place the birds fly for miles up and down the coast to their fishing grounds.

Altho heavy and clumsy in shape, the pelican is as expert as the kingfisher at diving. From a height of thirty or forty feet, he drops like a plummet into a school of small fish and rises to the surface with pouch filled with fish and water. As the diver stretches his neck and draws his bill straight up, the water runs out and the fish are left. The head is thrown back and the whole catch is swallowed at one gulp. But the pelican does not fish for himself alone, for he is generally followed by one or more thieving gulls.

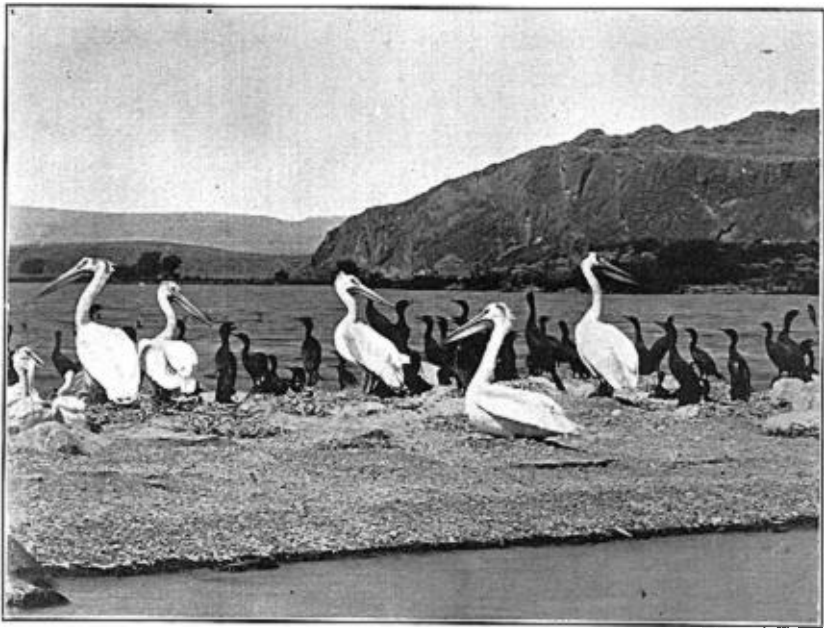
One day while standing on the wharf at Santa Monica, I saw a brown pelican flapping along with a pair of gulls a few feet behind. A moment later the big bird spied a fish, for with a back stroke of his wing, he turned to dive. He gathered speed as he went and with wings partly closed and rigid, he hit the water with a resounding splash. The lower mandible of his bill contracted and opened his pouch that held about as much water as the weight of his body. He came to the surface and was in a helpless condition till the water ran out, and at this moment he was pounced upon by the swift-moving gulls who snatched the fish and were away before the slow pelican could retaliate.

At another time I saw a band of a dozen pelicans hovering over a school of fish. The birds rose from the surface, swung around till about twenty feet above, and two or three of them dropped into the water at a time. A bevy of twenty gulls were fluttering around to pounce on every pelican that dove. The instant

one dropped and came up with fish, he was surrounded by a bunch of gulls, each scrambling to get a nose in the pelican's big fish bag.

The summer of 1895, we had a chance to make an intimate study of the white pelican in its home on the lakes of southern Oregon. I have never seen this bird plunge for its fish as the brown pelican does, but those we watched always swam along and with a swift motion scooped up the fish here and there from the surface. The birds were so plentiful about Tule Lake that we were anxious to find where they were nesting.

We set out across Tule Lake for the peninsula which was fifteen miles distant. Our fourteen-foot boat was well loaded, but a good wind to the rear helped us along. The further we went, the stiffer the wind grew. At first we used our big wagon-umbrella as a sail. I stood in the bow and held it, and we plowed along,



AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS AND FARALLONE CORMORANTS NESTING  
TOGETHER ON ISLET AT SOUTH END OF TULE LAKE, ON  
THE CALIFORNIA AND OREGON BOUNDARY LINE

but at times the wind came in puffs, and once or twice our sail was almost demolished and I nearly landed in the water. The boat began to ship water and we both had to exert our best energy at the oars as the wind veered. Not till dusk did we reach the rocky shore of the peninsula, only to find that the treacherous point forbade a landing. Later we found a small sandy beach where we waded ashore and made a rough camp for the night.

This peninsula, upon which we found the crater of an extinct volcano, extended out from the east shore. The neck at the narrowest point was only fifty feet wide and across this we dragged our boat and set out for the lower end of the lake.

We paddled up the inlet for two miles and came to a rocky island containing a colony of Farallone cormorants. Here on the rocks, in a space of twenty-five by

fifty feet, we found one hundred and ninety nests, containing about three hundred birds and half as many eggs not yet hatched.

That night we camped opposite the cormorant rookery and just below what is known as the crater. The next day we rowed on south past Rattlesnake Island. In the afternoon we made camp across from another large rookery where the cormorants and pelicans were nesting. This island held two hundred and fifty cormorant nests—about two hundred and seventy-five young birds and two hundred eggs. The cormorant nests were built up of sticks, but the pelicans simply made a depression in the sand for their eggs.

This was the only colony of pelicans we found after cruising for two weeks on Tule Lake, altho we had seen a flock of several hundred birds that fished about the Lake and roosted together at night on one of the sandbars. They were very likely last year's birds and being immature, had not yet begun to nest.

When we crossed over to Lower Klamath Lake, we found it very different from the south end of Tule Lake, where we had fairly good places to camp. Extending for several miles out from the main shore was a seemingly endless area of



HERD OF YOUNG PELICANS; NOTE THE TULE-THATCHED BLIND AT RIGHT, FROM WHICH THE CAMERA WAS OPERATED IN OBTAINING MORE INTIMATE LIFE-STUDIES

floating tule islands, between which flowed a network of channels. These islands furnished good homes for the great flocks of pelicans that return each spring to live about these lakes and rivers that teem with fish. The tules had grown up for generations. The heavy growth of each year shoots up thru the dead stalks of the preceding season till it forms a fairly good floating foundation. On the top of this the pelicans had perched and trodden down the tules till they formed a surface often strong enough to support a man. But it was like walking on the crust of the snow, for you never knew just when it would break thru. However, these treacherous islands were the only camping places we had during the two weeks we cruised the Lower Klamath.

We rowed on among these islands and found the pelican colonies scattered along for about two miles. There were eight or ten big rookeries, each containing from four to six hundred birds. Besides, there were about fifteen others that had all the way from fifty to two hundred birds. The birds nested a few feet apart on these dry beds, each laying from one to three eggs.

The pelican season begins in April after the snow and ice have melted, and

lasts till August and September when the young are able to care for themselves. In June and July when we visited the colonies, the young were able to walk and swim about, but the wing feathers had not yet developed flying strength, for the birds were still in the downy stage.

It takes about a month for the pelican to hatch its eggs, and the baby pelican is naked, helpless and ugly, and has to be shielded from the sun by its mother. Its ugliness increases with age till the youngster is covered with white down. The young birds stick close to the nesting site where they are fed by the parents, until, when about six weeks old, they begin to run about and mingle with the other young birds.



HALF-GROWN YOUNG PELICAN WITH WING QUILLS PARTLY GROWN, BUT BODY YET COVERED WITH DOWN

It would be difficult to tell how an old pelican can recognize her own, but she seems to do it, for nesting is not a communal matter. As soon as an old bird alighted in the rookery, she was besieged by half a dozen young ones, but I never saw one of the parents feed till she had apparently made some selection as to the young.

The half grown pelicans stood around with their mouths open, panting like a lot of dogs after the chase on a hot day, their pouches shaken at every breath. When we went near one of the colonies, the youngsters went tottering off on their big webbed feet with wings dragging on this side and that as if they were poorly handled crutches. The first thing they did when we approached was to vomit up fish and then stagger on with the

crowd. Following along after a band of young pelicans was as bad as crossing a battlefield where the victims were fish, for the carcasses were strewn all along in the wake of the procession. The youngsters huddled together by hundreds in a small space. Those on the outside pushed and climbed to get nearer the center, till it looked worse than any football scrimmage I ever saw. I watched one large bird rush for the center, bucking over three or four others and finally landing astraddle the neck of another. When we went nearer, those on the outside began to circle the ends and around and around the whole mass revolved as it moved off. Soon after the little gluttons retraced their steps to pick up the fish dinners that had been left behind.

One might wonder how such a huge-billed bird could feed a helpless young

chick just out of the egg, but it was done with apparent ease. The parent regurgitated a fishy soup into the front end of its pouch and the baby pelican pitched right in and helped himself out of this family dish. As the young bird grew older and larger, at each meal time he kept reaching further into the big pouch of his parent until finally when he was half grown, it was a remarkable sight. The mother opened her mouth and the whole head and neck of her nestling disappeared down her capacious maw while he hunted for his dinner in the internal regions.

In this wide area of low islands and water, it was necessary, since we wanted to study the pelicans at close range, to adopt some method of hiding. So taking our large wagon-umbrella covered with a piece of green canvas that hung down around the sides, we planted it among the tules at the edge of one of the largest colonies and covered the top well with reeds. While we both remained in the blind, the pelicans were slow in returning, but when one of us departed, the old birds seemed to think we had both gone and soon began sailing in to feed the young.

I sat under the umbrella and reeds with my reflex camera pointing out thru a slit in the canvas. There were four or five hundred young pelicans bunched along on the platform of tules only a few yards away. A few minutes later the first old bird

pitched awkwardly in and alighted near by and several young birds waddled forward to meet her. She caught sight of a piece of partly dried fish that had been disgorged, grasped it in her bill and tossed it away before one of the youngsters could grab it. One of the other birds rushed for it, but she was ahead and threw it as far as she could again, and the third time she



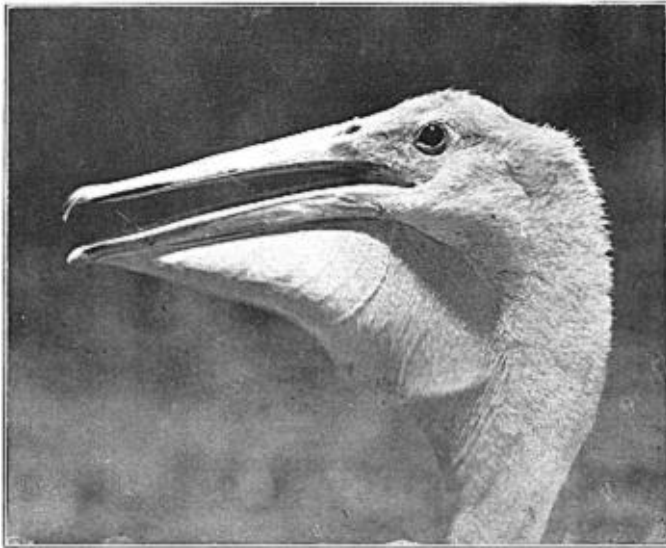
IN THE SWIM AT AN EARLY AGE

tossed it over in the tules where it could not be reached.

Just then another mother dropped into the nursery and she was besieged by several ravenous children. Each began pecking at her bill, trying to make her feed them. But she moved off in apparent unconcern, or perhaps she was making some selection as to which one to feed. She waddled about till one of the youngsters began a series of actions that were very interesting. He fell on the ground before the old bird, grunting and flapping his wings as if he were in the last stages of starvation. Still the mother did not heed his entreaties and the youngster suddenly got well and began pecking at her bill again. The old bird backed up as if she were getting a good footing and slowly opened her mouth to admit the bill of the little pelican. She drew her neck up till the ends of the upper and lower mandibles were braced against the ground and her pouch was distended to the limit. Jonah-like, down the mother's throat went the head and neck of the child till he seemed about to be swallowed had it not been for his fluttering wings. He remained buried in the depths for about two minutes, eating everything he could find. Nor did he withdraw from the family cupboard voluntarily, but when the

supply was exhausted or the mother thought he had enough, she began slowly to rise and struggle to regain her upright position. The youngster was loath to come out and flapping his wings, he tried in every way to hold on as she began shaking back and forth. The mother shook around over ten or twelve feet of ground till she literally swung the young bird off his feet and sent him sprawling over on the dry tules.

For a few moments the youngster lay dazed, then as if coming to his senses, he seemed to go raving mad. I never saw such an apparent show of temper in anything but a badly spoiled child. He whirled around once or twice, grasping his own wing in his bill, shaking and biting it. Then seeing one or two other young birds standing near, he plunged headlong at them, jabbing right and left with his beak, while they rapidly retreated out of his way. By that time the wrath of the youngster seemed spent, for he fell sprawled-out, and soon went sound asleep in the sun.



YOUNG PELICAN, PANTING FROM THE HEAT

It is surprising to see the size of a fish a pelican can handle. In watching among the rookeries of young pelicans, I have often seen the old birds bring in fish from eight to ten inches in length, for they seem to handle such a size with apparent ease. But I have also seen lake trout eighteen inches in length that have been brought in by the old pelicans. Whether these big fish were caught alive by the old birds or just picked up dead, I do not know; but if a pelican gobbles

down a live fish of that size, I judge the bird would feel very like a dog being wagged by his tail.

The white pelican is a striking mark on the water and is very stately in flight. While cruising the broad lakes we were often deceived when the water was calm by thinking a white pelican was the distant sail of a boat. There is something so misleading in the reflection and the shape of one of these birds when it is floating in the sunlight far out on the surface of the water. At such a time a flock of them will look, for all the world, like a squadron of white war-ships.

It was a daily habit where the birds were nesting, for them to take an aerial promenade each morning. After returning from the fishing grounds and lounging about the nests for a while, the pelicans began to circle over the colony in a large company, rising higher and higher till they were almost lost in the blue. By watching we could occasionally see the faint flashes of white as the snowy breasts reflected a gleam of the sun. For hours the sky would glitter with these great



AN ADULT PELICAN JUST DROPPING INTO ROOKERY

birds as they soared about. Then it was thrilling to see some of them descend with rigid, half-closed wings. They used the sky as a big toboggan-slide and dropped like meteors, leaving a trail of thunder. Several times when we first heard the sound, we were deceived into thinking it was the advance messenger of a heavy storm and jumped up expecting to see black clouds rising from behind the mountains.

*Portland, Oregon.*



A HEAVY BIRD LIKE A PELICAN RISES FROM THE WATER  
WITH DIFFICULTY, AND USES ITS FEET  
IN GETTING A START

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