

# American white pelican

*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*

By Dennis C. Joyes



“Pelicans?” I was telling two friends from back East what they might expect to see on a bird watching trip to Montana. They were familiar with brown pelicans along the Eastern Seaboard but were surprised to learn that the larger white pelican breeds in the continent’s western interior, including Montana. Like my friends, many people think of pelicans as saltwater birds, typically seen perched on a pier in an ocean harbor, not flying over cattle, pronghorn, and sage-grouse on the open prairie.

## Appearance

The white pelican is unmistakable—a large white bird with black flight feathers, an enormous orange bill, and a wingspan that stretches 8 to 9 feet (among North American birds, only the California condor has a longer span). On land, white pelicans are awkward, almost clownish, with short legs, big feet, and that massive bill. But in water the birds are strong swimmers, moving single file or several abreast, like busy little tugboats. And in flight, pelicans are magnificent. You can often see them from a distance of several miles soaring in formation over prairie lakes like a squadron of white B-52 bombers.

During breeding season, both sexes grow a temporary 3-by-3-inch bump on the top of their bill.

## Range

White pelicans breed on remote islands from western Canada south to Colorado, and from Great Salt Lake in northern Utah east to Min-

## Scientific name

*Pelecanus* is the Latin word for “pelican” and *erythrorhynchos* is from the Greek *erythros* (“red”) and *rhynchos* (“bill.”)

nesota. Montana’s four breeding colonies are at Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Canyon Ferry Lake, Bowdoin NWR, and Eyraud (Arod) Lakes Waterfowl Production Area, northeast of Choteau. The total breeding population for the state stands at just under 13,000 birds. The Medicine Lake and Bowdoin colonies winter along the Gulf of Mexico, departing in stages during late October, while the two western colonies cross the Rocky Mountains to winter on the coast of southern California and western Mexico.

## Food

Pelicans feed mainly on fish, a diet that puts them at odds with anglers who accuse them of depleting game fish stocks.

Yet those who study pelicans maintain that the birds feed almost entirely on forage fish such as suckers, carp, and minnows. At Canyon Ferry Lake, a study showed that 90 percent of the pelican’s diet consists of carp and crayfish, while at Bowdoin NWR the birds feed almost exclusively on carp.

White pelicans fish by dipping their beaks into shallow water to scoop up small fish (unlike oceanic brown pelicans, which plunge dive for their prey). The birds feed cooperatively, forming parallel lines or semicircles in order to drive prey into shallow water.

White pelicans’ feeding habits in smaller lakes and rivers are unknown. Low water levels, for example, may bring game fish within reach of pelicans. Regurgitated hooks and lures found in pelican colonies show that the birds sometimes capture game fish injured or slowed by anglers.

## Social Behavior

Pelicans are social birds that spend their lives migrating, nesting, feeding, and loafing in large groups. In summer, flocks disperse to surrounding marshes, lakes, and rivers to forage, often traveling 100 to 200 miles from their home colonies. Pelicans live as long as 25 years. Except for low grunts made during courtship or conflict, the birds are silent throughout their long lives.

## Reproduction

Pelican courtship begins in late April or early May, shortly after the birds arrive at their island nesting sites. Nests are a shallow depression on the ground rimmed by a ridge of gravel, soil, or vegetation. The female lays two or three dull white eggs, which hatch within 30 days. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young, which reach down their parents’ throats for regurgitated food. Owing to intense sibling rivalry and aggression, one chick usually won’t survive. Pelican young leave the nest after three weeks, at which time they form semi-independent groups known as crèches. Parental feeding continues for another two months.

## Conservation

Because of DDT and other environmental toxins, white pelican numbers declined severely in the mid-20th century. Environmental regulations have allowed populations to recover. Though pelican numbers in Montana are considered stable, populations require constant vigilance. Pelicans often abandon their nests and nesting colonies when disturbed by boats and low-flying aircraft. The birds are also susceptible to West Nile virus, which struck the Medicine Lake refuge in 2006-07 and killed nearly half the pelican chicks. More recently, oil contaminants have been detected in the tissues of Montana white pelicans that winter on the Gulf of Mexico, likely from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. 🐼

Writer Dennis C. Joyes is a frequent visitor to Montana who lives in Toronto, Ontario.