



Pelicans, endangered no more, but still at risk.

*A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His bill will hold more than his belican,
He can take in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I'm damned if I see how the helican!*

This salty limerick is often attributed to Ogden Nash, but was actually written by Dixon Lanier Merritt in 1910.

Every summer, I look forward to the return of the pelicans. But this year, there have been very few pelicans at a time when we normally see them in large numbers, plunge-diving into the ocean for anchovies, sardines and other small fish. What's going on?

The Pacific brown pelican spends winters in Baja and the Gulf of California, nesting in the spring primarily on offshore islands. About 15-20% of the population nests on California's Channel Islands. After the young have fledged, pelicans travel north along the Pacific coast as far as British Columbia, feeding on fish along the way. Depending on the year, they usually arrive on the Central Coast starting around late May, with their numbers increasing throughout the summer and early fall. As winter storms arrive, most return to their wintering and breeding grounds to the south.

Pelicans incubate eggs with the heat radiating from the skin of their feet, essentially standing on their eggs to keep them warm. Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, pesticides in the food chain nearly wiped out the entire North American population. The pesticide Endrin killed pelicans outright, while DDT contamination caused thin-shelled eggs that broke under the weight of the parents during incubation. In 1970, brown pelicans were federally listed as endangered. The plight of pelicans and other iconic bird species including peregrine falcons and bald eagles led to a ban on DDT and reduction of other pesticides in 1972. Over the next 30 years, brown pelicans made a full comeback, and were removed from the list of threatened and endangered species in 2009. Until recently, their story was one of recovery and triumph. But it's not over.

In recent years, scientists have observed poor productivity of brown pelicans at the Channel Islands. Pelicans do not breed when food supplies are too low to sustain raising their chicks successfully. Crashes in anchovy and sardine populations raised concerns about pelicans. In 2015, a partnership formed between the Audubon Society of California, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct surveys of nesting pelicans. Lack of funds to hire trained scientists threatened to severely curtail the range of the survey.

The pelican is not a difficult bird to spot and identify. Researchers invited volunteer birders to participate, noting where they saw pelicans along the coast. The first survey took place on May 7, and a second survey will take place on October 1. Results are expected by early next year.

The Morro Coast Audubon Society is coordinating the pelican survey in SLO County. If you would like to volunteer, contact Dave Tyra at Dave@morrocoastaudubon.org.

If you would like to see a pelican close-up and learn more about pelicans, we are fortunate to have a visit from *Morro*, a rehabilitated pelican, and his keeper, Dani Nicholson. They will be here on Sunday, September 11, from 1-3 pm at the Creekside Reserve, 2264 Center Street, in Cambria. The program is hosted by Greenspace, The Cambria Land Trust. A donation of \$10 is suggested. Bring your own seating to this outdoor event. This is a great opportunity to see what was once, and may be again, a rare bird.

