



US Army Corps
of Engineers®
St Louis District

American White Pelican

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos

Description

American White Pelicans are one of the largest birds in North America. They average 60 inches in length, 107 inches in width, and weigh 16 pounds on average. Their wingspan is an impressive 9 to 10 feet. The bodies of pelicans are white with black wing tips, which are only visible when the bird spreads its massive wings. The legs (which are short in length) and feet of the pelicans are orange. Their orange feet are webbed not only between their four front toes, but also between the second toe and inwardly directed back toe. A Pelican's bill is pale yellow with a yellowish pouch connected to the lower mandible of the bill. ***The pouch can stretch up to six inches and can hold three gallons of water!***



Habitat

In this region, the Mississippi River and its tributaries provide ideal habitat for the American White Pelican. Large flocks can be spotted on sandbars and small islands located within sloughs and backwaters such as Ellis Bay which create foraging opportunities. The American white pelican can also be found near lakes, salt bays, marshes, and beaches throughout their migration.



Breeding

During the breeding season, White Pelicans bills are bright orange and males also grow a fibrous plate or knob on the bill. This lasts from late winter until the females lay their eggs. Pelicans mature at three years old and have a life span of 12-14 years.

Nesting

A White Pelican's nest is usually constructed out of sticks, grasses, and reeds built on the ground, typically on island or an inland lake. Two to four chalky white eggs are produced, and the incubation period is one month. Both parents tend the nest and help in feeding the young. Chicks remain dependent on adults for up to four weeks. They bite the base of the adult's bill and pouch to signal that they are hungry. Adults rarely make any noise, but when they do it is usually a low grunt. However, the young are usually very noisy.

Eating Behavior



Pelicans are carnivorous. Their diet consists of fish and crustaceans. After a fish is caught, the bill is pointed downward allowing the water to drain. The bill is then raised and the bird swallows. When feeding, a group of pelicans work together by driving the fish ahead and plunging

their bills in the water simultaneously. Take time to visit Ellis Bay or look along the river shoreline to see them in action.

American White Pelican Migration Patterns

American White Pelicans winter on the Gulf Coast, California, and Mexico. During the spring they migrate to their summer nesting areas in the Great Plains and the Great Basin. The White Pelican migrates February through March and October through November. The largest population of Pelicans can be found at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary during these months. However, it is not uncommon to see these flocks throughout the year.

