

[From Summer 2002]

Fisherman Island Pelicans

Recently, biologists, interns and volunteers from Virginia and Maryland cooperated to perform a pelican nest count on Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge. By doing so, the total number of pelican nests in the Chesapeake Bay is believed to be known.

The pelicans on Fisherman Island (FI) are brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), a common seabird sight for beach goers along the southeastern coast. Known for its large size, large bill and throat pouch, pelicans breed, roost, and feed in flocks. Often a wedge formation of gliding pelicans can be seen cruising gracefully just barely above the water. The pelican feeds by diving from heights as high as thirty feet and snaring fish in its throat pouch. While not feeding, pelicans can be seen bobbing up and down on the water, aided in buoyancy by air sacs behind the feathers.

The pelican colony on Fisherman Island is actually a large colony trailed by two sub-colonies. Each of the colonies is composed of 5-10 inch nests of sticks and reeds sitting closely together on and around small dunes. The habitat of FI is attractive to many nesting birds and the total numbers indicate the pelican is no exception. A federally endangered bird on the West Coast, the pelican numbers could go down in the East if such coastal nesting habitat is destroyed. The FI nest count is an important part of monitoring population numbers in the Chesapeake Bay area.

As the rather laid back pelicans unhurriedly left their nests, biologists and volunteers walked through the colony, taking a census of eggs and chicks and tallying nest numbers. The total number of nests turned out to be over one thousand and indicates an increase from the last count. Let's hope this is a good sign of things to come for the beautiful brown pelican.

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