

[From Summer 1995]

Who Am I?

I am considered to be a comical type bird who is adored by many humans. I appear awkward on land, yet I am beautiful and graceful in flight. I perform skillful maneuvers in the air, and I'm able to do a 70 foot "high dive" into the water in pursuit of fish, my favorite food. Have you guessed yet that I am the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis* for you scientific types)?

The brown pelican is a wonderful bird that has brought joy to those fortunate enough to have observed it in nature. Having it nest in our state is a special occurrence because historically Virginia was not included in its breeding range. The year 1986 marked the bird's first attempt at nesting in Virginia; unfortunately, this attempt failed. In 1987, 40 pairs nested on a northern island, producing 22 young. In 1989 and 1990, a southern island had 50-100 nesting pairs. Even better is that there are currently around 250 pairs nesting on Fisherman Island. This is the largest breeding colony in Virginia, as well as the largest colony north of North Carolina.

For those of you who are not familiar with this bird, the brown pelican weighs about eight pounds as an adult and has a wing span of over seven feet. They nest along the Atlantic coast from Maryland to Florida, as well as in regions along the Gulf and Pacific coasts. Usually three eggs are laid during the months of March and April. Both parents spend the four week incubation period tending the eggs. Upon hatching, the gangly young, which resemble small fluffy white dinosaurs, are fed regurgitated fish. They are capable of flight at about ten weeks of age. One could aptly call the brown pelican a "beach bum," since its preferred habitats are saltwater bays and oceanic beaches. It is rarely seen inland or more than 20 miles out to sea. The birds normally nest in the low vegetation in the intertidal zone.

You may wonder how this bird is capable of plunging into the water from such great heights without harm. The brown pelican does have a few special adaptations to deal with this. The bird has air sacs under the flesh on the front of its body which provide a cushion against the force encountered when striking the surface of the water. They also have a nictitating membrane, which is a clear membrane that covers the eyes to protect them while underwater and during flight.

While these and several other biological facts are quite interesting, I would like to bring this article back to the point of how special it is to have brown pelicans nesting in Virginia. At one time the only viable population was located in Florida. In 1973, brown pelicans were placed on the list of endangered species. This dramatic decline was due to eggshell thinning, induced by the pesticides DDT and DDE, and habitat loss caused by human encroachment on beaches.

The good news is that the brown pelican is making a comeback. Scientists estimate that their numbers have now increased to about 30,000 worldwide. They have been removed

from the Endangered Species List in portions of their range, including the Atlantic coast. But it's still considered to be of "special concern" in Virginia due to nesting population growth on the Eastern Shore, pesticides and marine pollutants.

You can help to reduce marine pollutants. One way this can be done is by reducing your use of plastics. Another is by cutting plastic six-pack rings up before disposal and by recycling if possible. If you are a boater, do not throw your trash into the sea; dispose of it properly on land. Finally, if you happen upon a nesting colony, keep your distance so the birds will not be disturbed. Researchers state that if they are able to locate nesting areas and keep human disturbance to a minimum, the population numbers may increase along the Atlantic coast. This means we may be able to enjoy the antics of even more brown pelicans in Virginia for a long time to come, and this is certainly good news to me!

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