

Pigeon's Pelicans

By Barbara Calvert

Sighting these remarkable birds brings one in mind of a prehistoric creature. With a wingspan of over 2 metres and weighing up to 8 kilograms, pelicans are listed among the world's largest birds. Residents of Pigeon Lake have been fortunate for many years to observe them regularly from May until September.

Pelicans feed by dipping their yellow gular sac into the water and scooping up fish; each scoop can hold as much as 13 litres of fish and water. The fish are eaten head-first and digested by strong stomach acid.

Although the barren, rocky island off of Ma-Me-O Beach would appear to be an ideal nesting site, Stan Gosche of the Edmonton Nature Club believes it unlikely to find nesting pelicans due to high levels of boat traffic. Nesting sites for pelicans are extremely sensitive as pelicans are among a number of species to have altricial young. Babies are born blind, featherless, and completely helpless. They require constant attention to survive and take much longer to fledge than other water birds. If disturbed by a boat or curious birders, the mothers will abandon their nests, leaving their vulnerable babies to the danger of starvation or predation from gulls.

If you've ever watched these amazing birds, you will have noticed them circling on the thermal updrafts and gradually disappearing from sight. Pelicans can travel up to 120 kilometres a day to feed, and our pelicans may travel from established nesting sites as far away as Hastings Lake to feed on the abundant fish population at Pigeon. When hunting, pelicans cruise low over the water, seldom flapping their great wings. They utilize a principle called ground effects, which gives them increased lift as they glide over a low-resistance cushion of air. The Russians capitalized on this principle in their design of the "ekranoplan", dubbed The Caspian Sea Monster by the CIA. This giant plane can carry 500 tonnes and cruise at over 180 kilometres per hour at an altitude of 3 metres, well under radar capabilities.

The American White Pelican migrates in September across the Great Plains to the Salton Sea in southern California, close to the Mexican border. This large lake became polluted in the 1970s, and an epidemic of avian botulism greatly depleted pelican numbers. During his two terms in office, U.S. Congressman Sonny Bono (of Sonny and Cher fame) was instrumental in gathering public support to clean up the lake. In 1998, after Bono's death, the Sonny Bono Salton Sea Restoration Project was initiated, and bird populations have since been restored. Pelicans return to nest in Alberta in late April, taking about two weeks to return to the fresh, vibrant habitat that is renewed by our Alberta winters.

If you would like to learn more about pelicans or any of the other birds of Pigeon Lake, you can connect to <fanweb.ca>. This site contains excellent information for avid birders.