

*Journal took this to Journal November 2-1944*  
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PELICAN, DIVE BOMBER AMONG BIRDS

by

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Soldiers and sailors and especially coast guards stationed along the seashores become much interested in the myriads of birds that come and go through the months of the year, the birds that patter and play on the wet sands, feed and fight, or ride the wild winds and waves with jaunty abandon. The birds are never lonesome, but the boys are. Some rare and strange friendships come about between those who need each other, those who are tied down and those who have wings and the freedom of the heavens.

In the bird world, the big, awkward, sap-faced pelican is an ace flier. Whether landing on land or water, his light, hollow bone structure and his system of air sacs bring him down softly, and he never has motor trouble. When fishing, the brown pelican is a star actor. A company of will swing and circle some twenty or thirty feet above the water, keeping an eye for runs of small fish. One will start by up-ending and falling like a plummet into the school of fish, and soon one after another the whole band are turning somersaults. Most of the divers cut the water clean, but once in a while there is a back-flop and a big splash. You wouldn't think such big, clumsy birds could move so fast.

The white pelican formerly had great breeding rookeries in the marshes of southern Oregon and northern California, but its numbers were greatly reduced by drainage of its hereditary nesting places. But again the snow-white wing to wing wedge of great white birds may be seen over Malheur, Tule Lake, and Upper Klamath.

Busy photographing a duck's nest in the thick tangle of nettles above the water, I heard a distant roaring sound that was coming nearer like the approach of a storm. I raised up expecting to see black clouds rising from the south. The noise increased, and I looked up to see white pelicans tobogganing out of the heavens, leaving a trail of thunder behind. They passed over my head and sailed slanting down over the lake, back-pedaling as they



landed and ruffling the water.

When taking off, the heavy pelican has to have a long, smooth runway. Spreading his wide wings, he starts slowly, kicking the water out behind him for some distance to gain speed, gradually rising until he can lift up into the air. It is a typical airplane take-off.

Another spectacular stunt of the big flier is the pelican promenade. After the night shift has returned from the feeding grounds and the young have breakfasted, the parents sit around for a couple of hours attending to family affairs. Then there is a stir and they begin rising from the colony, swinging slowly around gaining height. It seemed effortless and aimless, but not so. Gradually they formed in a big circle, swinging around and around, higher and higher until in half an hour they looked like a flurry of snowflakes in the clear blue sky. The eye lost sight of the birds except as the sun was reflected in faint flashes from snowy breasts. After two or three hours, the promenade was ended and the birds zoomed down with rigid, half closed wings. The clear black on the wings was a showy contrast to the spotless white of the bodies. It was a glorious flight, a flight that was sublime in the lofty blue dome. No "ship" will ever sail the skies with the grace and beauty of the white pelican.

Several mornings I watched a company of pelicans on their feeding grounds along the edges of Tule Lake. The pelicans' game was to spot a run of minnows close to the surface. They tagged right at its tail, up-ending and scooping their big bills down, crowding over each other, twisting and turning with the fish, splashing the water into a turmoil - a regular free-for-all. Once in a while the run of fish must have turned their course to escape, for the pelicans scrambled over each other to back-track and keep up and tail the fish. They were so absorbed in the game that they paid little attention to a spectator on the bank. When the fish gave them the slip, they started home to their families, flapping low as if water-logged, just skimming the surface.



The first time I ever saw a motley crowd of half grown pelicans, I thought Nature had surely done her best to make something ugly and ridiculous. It was a warm day and the half clothed, lumpy youngsters stood around with their mouths open, panting with the heat. When I came near, they went tottering off on their webbed feet with wings dragging on this side and that, as if they were poorly handled crutches. In some places they huddled by hundreds. Those on the outside pushed and climbed to get near the center. I watched one large fellow rush for the middle, bucking over three or four, and finally landing astraddle of another. As I went closer, those on the outside began to circle the ends, and around and around the whole mass revolved as it moved off.

One might wonder how such a huge billed bird as this pelican could feed a helpless chick just out of the egg. In fact, it wasn't so easy. The old bird regurgitated a fishy soup into the front end of her pouch, and the baby pitched right in and helped himself out of the family dish. As he grew older and larger, at each meal he kept reaching further into the big bag, until finally when he was half grown it was a shocking sight. I

I watched a mother that was besieged by several ravenous children. Each began pecking at her bill, but she moved off in unconcern. She waddled about for five minutes when one youngster approached and put on a show. He fell on the ground before the old bird, grunting and flapping his wings as if he was in the last stages of starvation. She did not hurry and he began pecking at her bill. The old bird backed up and stretched her neck until the ends of her upper and lower mandibles were braced against the ground, and her pouch was distended to the limit. Monah-like, down the big throat went the head and neck of the child, till he seemed about to be swallowed, except for his fluttering wings. He remained buried in the depths for a few minutes, guzzling everything in sight. Nor did he withdraw voluntarily from the family cupboard.

When the supply was exhausted, or the mother thought he had enough, she began to rise slowly and struggle to regain her upright position. The young bird flapped his wings and tried in every way to hold on as she began shaking him



back and forth. She wobbled about over ten or twelve feet of ground until she literally sent him sprawling over on the dry tules. For a few seconds he lay dazed. Then he went raving mad. He whirled around once or twice, grasping his own wing in his bill, shaking and biting it. Seeing one or two other birds standing near, he plunged headlong at them, jabbing to right and left with his beak. By that time his wrath seemed spent, and he fell sprawled out and soon went sound asleep.

The white pelican arrives in Oregon in March and remains until November. Formerly very abundant in the State, it has been greatly reduced in recent years, but is slowly coming back. The colonies were usually located on great masses of floating tules that had been tramped down by the birds until they formed floating platforms. There the eggs were laid, usually two, in May and June.

The California brown pelican breeds in the southern part of the United States and is known in Oregon only when it comes further north along the coast between breeding seasons. The birds are usually seen along the Oregon coast in August and September. (Gabrielson and Jewett)