

Journal May 14-1936
for about July 14

THE FISHING HABITS OF THE BROWN PELICAN

The California brown pelicans nest on the islands off the southern coast of California. After the nesting season in the summer and fall these birds move north up the coastline and spend several months fishing as far as the mouth of the Columbia River. It is very different from the white pelican that nests in the lake region of southern Oregon.

Although heavy and clumsy in shape, the brown pelican is as expert as the kingfisher at diving. He has a large skinny bag that hangs from the lower part of his bill, and this is capable of holding several quarts when it is distended. When not in use this sac is contracted so that it occupies very little space.

The white pelican swims along and up-ends in a school of fish, using his pouch like a dip-net. It was formerly thought that this big pouch served to convey live fish swimming in water to the little pelicans in the nest. But, as Audubon remarked long ago, it is doubtful whether a pelican could fly at all with his burden so out of trim. The young are fed with the partially digested fish from the crops of the parents.

From a height of thirty or forty feet the brown pelican drops into a school of small fish and rises to the surface with pouch filled with fish and water. As the diver stretches and draws his neck straight up, the water runs out and the fish are left. The head is thrown back and the whole catch is swallowed at one gulp. But the pelican does not fish for himself alone, for he is generally followed by one or more thieving gulls.

One day while standing on a wharf in southern California I saw a brown pelican flapping along with a pair of gulls a few feet

behind. A moment later the big bird spied a fish for with a back stroke of his wing he turned to dive. He gathered speed as he went and, with wings partly closed and rigid, he hit the water with a resounding splash. The lower mandible of his bill contracted and he opened his pouch that held as much water as the weight of his body. He came to the surface and was in a helpless condition till the water ran out. At this moment he was pounced upon by the swift-moving gulls. They dipped into his pouch and snatched the fish, and were away before the slow pelican could retaliate.

At another time I saw a band of pelicans hovering over a school of fish. They rose from the surface, swung around until about twenty feet above, and two or three of them dropped into the water at a time. A flock of twenty gulls was fluttering around to pounce upon every pelican that dove. The instant one dropped and came up with a fish he was surrounded by a bunch of gulls, each scrambling to get a nose in the pelican's big fish-bag.