

Brown Pelican

Pelecanus occidentalis

The Brown Pelican is a comically elegant bird with an oversized bill, sinuous neck, and big, dark body. Squadrons glide above the surf along southern and western coasts, rising and falling in a graceful echo of the waves. They feed by plunge-diving from high up, using the force of impact to stun small fish before scooping them up. They are fairly common today—an excellent example of a species' recovery from pesticide pollution that once placed them at the brink of extinction.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Brown Pelicans are huge, stocky seabirds. They have thin necks and very long bills with a stretchy throat pouch used for capturing fish. Their wings are very long and broad and are often noticeably bowed when the birds are gliding.

Color Pattern

Adult Brown Pelicans are gray-brown birds with yellow heads and white necks. In breeding plumage, the back and sides of the neck turn a rich, dark reddish-brown. Immatures are gray-brown above (including the head and neck) with pale whitish belly and breast.

Behavior

Brown Pelicans feed by plunging into the water, stunning small fish with the impact of their large bodies and scooping them up in their expandable throat pouches. When not foraging, pelicans stand around fishing docks, jetties, and beaches or cruise the shoreline. In flight, lines of pelicans glide on their broad wings, often surfing updrafts along wave faces or cliffs. Their wingbeats are slow, deep, and powerful.

Habitat

Brown Pelicans live along southern and western sea coasts and are rarely seen inland (except at the Salton Sea in California, where they are regular in large numbers). They nest in colonies, often on isolated islands free of land predators.

Cool Facts

- During a dive, the Brown Pelican tucks its head and rotates its body to the left. This maneuver is probably to cushion the trachea and esophagus—which are found on the right side of the neck—from the impact.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 39.4 - 53.9 inches
- Wingspan - 78.7 inches
- Weight - 70.5 - 176.4 ounces

