

Bird of the Month



Prescott's Pelicans

By Ryan Crouse

From the outside looking in, people often form perceptions of different bird species based on their habitat, most of which is justified. But it can be difficult to imagine some species existing outside these molds. Roadrunners belong in the desert, meadowlarks in the grasslands, and pelicans in the ocean, right?

When it comes to pelicans, it depends on the species. When asked to picture a pelican, most people likely imagine one diving into the surf off the California coast. This is reasonable, ingrained in us through both experience and media. This image represents the brown pelican, just one of eight species in the genus *Pelecanidae*. This small group also includes the American white pelican, and together they represent the North American pelican population.

Although the brown pelican is the most commonly recalled, the American white pelican is better suited to be considered “our pelican” for North America, especially in Arizona. While brown pelicans are found along the coastlines of the contiguous US, their population doesn’t often extend inland, as they primarily feed on saltwater fish. Conversely, American white pelicans thrive on freshwater fish, so they are mainly found farther inland. Their population is predominantly west of the Mississippi River, ranging from Guatemala to the northern expanses of Canada’s prairie provinces. While we have no resident population here in Prescott, they pass through regularly, and southwestern counties such as La Paz, Yuma, and Pima host wintering populations. In short, yes, Arizona has pelicans!

As a genus pelicans share certain characteristics, such as long bills with a gular pouch, an expandable sac below the mandible. This pouch can hold a few gallons of water and functions like a fisherman's net. Once they spot prey, they scoop up water and prey, allowing the water to drain before swallowing their meal. Pelicans are large, robust birds with long, broad wings, making them efficient flyers. Both brown and white pelicans are large, weighing between 7 and 14 pounds, but brown pelicans are the smallest of the eight species, with the great white pelican of the Eastern Hemisphere reaching almost 30 pounds! Another common trait is their gregarious nature, hunting cooperatively and forming large nesting colonies. Pelicans communicate more through body postures, wing-flapping and bill-snapping than vocalization, though they will also use grunts and hisses in breeding colonies.

American white pelicans are aptly named, with nearly all-white plumage. The only contrast is their black primary and secondary feathers, along with bright yellow bill and feet. To compare, brown pelicans have gray or brown bodies with black belly and white neck. During breeding they develop black plumage on the dorsal surface of the neck, and the pouch takes on a deep red color in the Pacific Ocean population. Among the Atlantic population, the pouch remains black regardless of breeding status.

The two species also differ in hunting techniques. Brown pelicans famously plunge headfirst into the ocean to catch their prey. White pelicans, however, swim along the surface, scooping up prey as they go. They often hunt in groups, using coordinated movements to herd fish into shallower water by flapping their wings. Once the fish are in position, they scoop up the prey-filled water in unison, capitalizing on their collective effort.

Being primarily an inland species, white pelicans use North America's lakes to nest and rear their young. Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota hosts the largest colonies, supporting up to 35,000 birds. Gunnison Island on the Great Salt Lake and Clear Lake in California also have large populations, the latter estimated to have hosted 60,000 pelicans in 1932, the largest colony ever recorded.

In the Prescott area groups of over 200 individuals have been spotted, though this is rare. During migration it's not unusual to see two or three American white pelicans on Willow Lake. Several years ago we were lucky enough to have a brown pelican at Lynx Lake, although it was only a couple days before it realized it wasn't swimming off the coast of Catalina Island, as it may have suspected.

If you're lucky you may spot a white pelican circling the lake before making its dramatic feet-first, water-ski landing! Take some time to study them gliding along the water before plunging their heads into the cool water in search of their next meal.