

PELICANS — FAMILY PELECANIDAE

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*

Adapted to an environment of ever-changing water levels, shifting opportunistically from site to site, the White Pelican varies greatly in the numbers wintering in San Diego County. The birds use both shallow coastal wetlands and inland lakes. For decades a major fraction of the population has wintered on the Salton Sea, but with that lake's fish population collapsing, a major redistribution seems inevitable. It may account for the upsurge in the number of White Pelicans in San Diego at the beginning of the 21st century.

Winter: Over the final quarter of the 20th century, the White Pelican had no consistent site in San Diego County. From 1997 to 2002, along the coast, we found it most regularly at Buena Vista Lagoon (H5/H6; up to 21 in the east basin 23 January 2000, L. E. Taylor). Another frequent site, as recorded by both Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) and atlas observers, is the southernmost basin of San Diego Bay, between Highway 75 and 7th Street (V10). Being gregarious and foraging in teams, the White Pelican may show up in flocks even where it is infrequent, as at Famosa Slough (R8; 40 on 29 January 2002, M. Sadowski) and the Tijuana River mouth (V10; 48 on 12 February 2002, R. T. Patton).

During the atlas period the more heavily used lakes inland were O'Neill (E6; up to 90 on 16 December 2001, P. A. Ginsburg), Henshaw (G17; up to 75 on 8 December 2000, G. C. Hazard), Wohlford (H12; up to 250 on 19 January 2002, J. C. Worley), and Hodges (K10; up to 93 on 23 December 2001, R. L. Barber). Curiously, our second-largest flock, of 100, was soaring far from water,



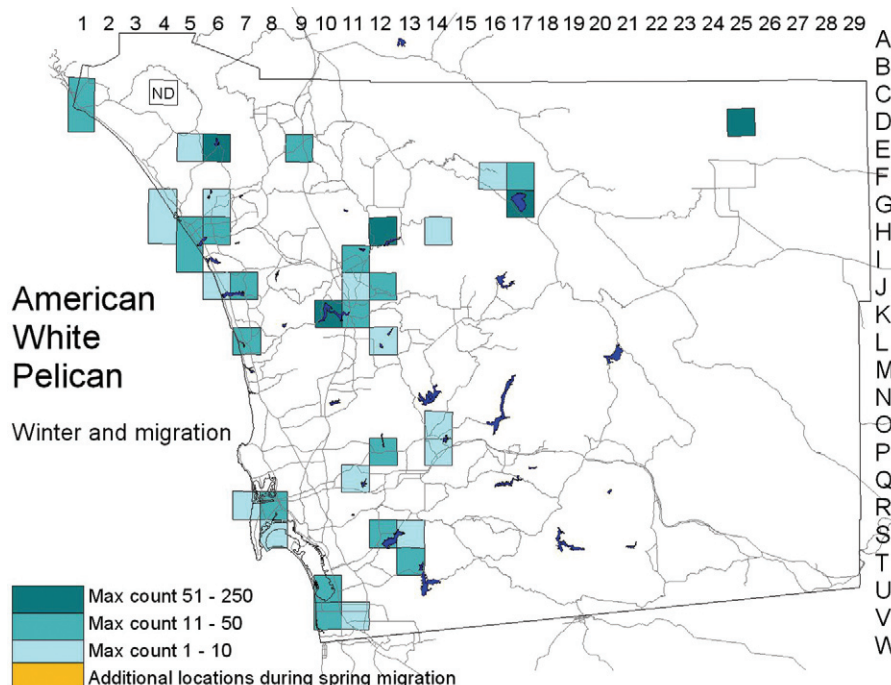
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

high over Coyote Mountain (D25), 16 December 2001 (P. R. Pryde). A flock of 48 was over Borrego Springs (F24) 2 January 1993 (M. Guest). These records suggest the birds shift to some extent between the Salton Sea and San Diego County's coastal slope.

Numbers of White Pelicans reaching San Diego County annually have varied from practically none in the early 1980s up to about 400 in 1988–89 and 1989–90, down to about 20 in 1997–98, and back up to over 300 in 2002–03.

Migration: The schedule of the White Pelican's movements is as irregular as the species' locations. The earliest fall date is 2 September (1968, one at Buena Vista Lagoon, A. Fries), and large flocks have been reported as early as 15 September (1962, 75 heading east over Culp Valley, H22, ABDSP file) and 20 September (1993, 70 over Warner Valley, G18, R. T. Patton). Some 187 in the San Diego Bay salt works 20 October 1993 were fall migrants, as fewer than 10 remained by January (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994).

Spring departure begins in February, but a few individuals remain until May, fewer still through summer. In 1988, summering White Pelicans occurred widely along San Diego County's coast (Macdonald et al. 1990). From 1997 to 2001 records after mid May were of two at Batiquitos Lagoon 28 May 2000 (J. Ciarletta), one there 1 August 1997 (C. C. Gorman), and eight at Buena Vista Lagoon 21 July 2001 (J. Smith). There has been no suggestion of White Pelican nesting in San Diego County



since Willett (1933) wrote “J. B. Dixon (MS) finds it occurring frequently at Lake Henshaw and believes that it would nest there if not persecuted by fishermen. He has found several eggs dropped by the birds along the shores of the lake.”

Conservation: By the 1980s the White Pelican’s total population had increased to about 100,000 breeding birds from about 40,000 in 1964 (Sidle et al. 1985). But

the degradation of the Salton Sea raises the question of whether these numbers can be sustained. If the over 10,000 pelicans wintering on the Salton Sea are forced to abandon that area some may shift to nearby alternative habitat in San Diego County, but most have no place to go. The process may have begun already; numbers in San Diego County increased continuously through the five years of the atlas period.