

"A Marvelous Bird Is The Pelican"

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

"A marvelous bird is the pelican, his bill holds more than his belican." So rhymed Ogden Nash. But he had in mind a bird with an intact bill. Some California brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis californicus*) have been retrieved recently minus their upper bills—they had been sawed off.

This morally reprehensible atrocity gained national attention through the news media, and the accompanying article (page 39) presents an accurate account of what is known thus far. This mutilation of wild birds is a criminal act punishable by law and is compounded by the fact that the California brown pelican is an endangered species making a valiant comeback from the verge of extinction.

So the pelican gets a moment on television; so a few newspapers run a few articles. So what? Tomorrow the media moves on. Then what of the pelican? What remains in your mind? How does this brief but shocking news affect the A.F.A. members? Is there anything to be learned? I think so.

First, let's take a broader look at the California brown pelican. I became acquainted with these birds years ago while sailing out of Newport Beach. They were common and comical to everyone. We watched them fly gracefully over the water and power dive into it to catch fish to eat. No one paid much attention to their natural history.

In fact, the California subspecies is larger and darker in color than its eastern relative. It had a large nesting colony on Anacapa Island and other nesting sites off the coast of Mexico. But the pelicans were just another striking and grotesque feature of the local coastal landscape.

During the late 1960s, however, the pelican population declined at a very noticeable rate, and because the birds were harmless to man and were easy and interesting to observe, many local people began to ask, "Where are all the pelicans?" Soon a hue and cry arose. The media took it up and various agencies became interested. The California brown pelican was placed on the State and Federal endangered species list. Between 1968 and 1972 only about ten baby pelicans were produced out of thousands of nesting attempts. In effect, the productivity plummeted to zero. The species was



Perched on rubber tire "rocks" this maimed pelican is drying out after a dip in the tub.

considered gone.

In 1971 a five-year study of the brown pelican was begun. The bird's productive failure was due to the collapse of thin-shelled eggs during incubation. Frank Todd, then at the Los Angeles Zoo, aided in the studies by working with captive pelicans. He acquired fish from various locales and tested them for toxicity. It was determined that the fish in California waters were contaminated with DDT and DDE pesticides. Reacting to the study recommendations, California, then the Federal government, banned the use of DDT.

Anacapa Island became a sanctuary and as the toxic pollutants diminished, the birds began a slow comeback. Fifty-seven babies were produced in 1972 and fifty-four in 1973. The population has grown to healthy numbers during the past ten years with about sixty to seventy thousand babies hatching out each year when the Mexican colonies are included.

To my mind, the present focus on the mutilated young pelicans points to a larger overall success. Man caused the decline of the brown pelicans in the first place, *but* man also responded to the situation with speed and responsibility. Without research in the field and upon captive pelicans, there would have been *no* young pelicans in California this year.

In my opinion, the A.F.A. bears a responsibility for some part in future programs of conservation. Our newly formed Conservation Committee is a perfect vehicle for funding and directing responsible programs to ensure the future of some bird, be it great or small.

To help the Conservation Committee raise money and to divert something back to nature that I have taken out of it, I am dedicating one pair of albino cockatiels to the cause. Every baby they raise in 1983 will be sold and the proceeds donated to the A.F.A. Conservation Committee. I'll put a small conservation sign on their aviary and although no one will see it but my wife and me, we will have a good feeling every time we look at it. Please do likewise and send to the Home Office a 3 x 5 card with your name on it as a token of your pledge. ●



This photo shows the different lengths of hacked off upper beaks. They are being hand fed and well cared for at Crown Valley Hospital while a team of dedicated people work to solve the problem.

Photos by M. Jean Hessler



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