

## ***California Brown Pelicans***

***Listed as an endangered species in 1970 after population declines linked to pesticides in the food chain.***

***Population has increased for at least two decades and now totals about 150,000 birds.***

***Build nests with sticks, typically in the Channel Islands and islands off the coast of Baja California.***

***Spread widely along the West Coast after breeding season.***

***Eat mainly sardines, anchovies and mackerel.***

***Online: For more information go to <http://www.esasuccess.org/reports/california.html>***

Pelicans coming back strong

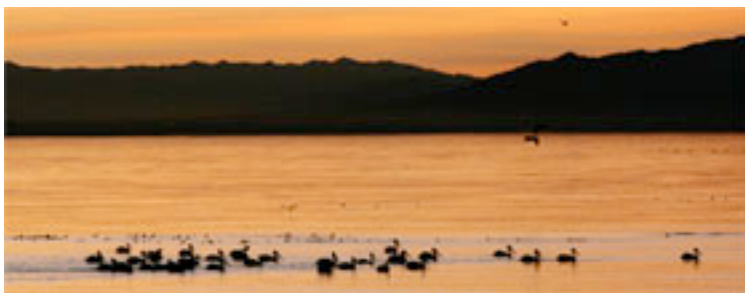
Robust numbers make bird a candidate to come off endangered-species list

By Mike Lee

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

November 14, 2006

SALTON SEA – Even for veteran wildlife managers like Chris Schoneman, the carnage he saw on the Salton Sea was tough to take. Everywhere he looked were dead birds – some 14,000 in all from Aug. 15 to Nov. 15 of 1996.



*PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune*

*California brown pelicans cruise the waters at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge. Wildlife officials report that the pelican population is on the rebound.*

Among the hardest hit were California brown pelicans, the prehistoric-looking creatures known for plunge-diving into the sea in search of fish. Botulism fueled what was billed as the largest pelican die-off in U.S. history.

Elsewhere along the California brown pelican's West Coast range, pesticides, oil spills and habitat destruction had caused the bird's population to plummet.

Despite those setbacks, decades of government protections have helped the iconic bird's overall population soar to roughly 150,000. Federal wildlife officials are expected to make a decision next month that could lead to the pelicans being taken off the Endangered Species Act list.

The pelican rebound reflects conservation gains being made nationwide. The progress comes as the protection act, enacted in 1973, is being attacked by property-rights advocates as broken and unsuccessful.

“The ESA needs a success story. . . . We want the public to know that it is possible for species to get off of the list,” said Bill Everett, a seabird biologist in Julian and a founding member of the Endangered Species Recovery Council.

Over the decades, 17 species have been delisted because they have recovered sufficiently. About 1,300 species remain protected. Some of them may no longer need the safeguards, which remain because of red tape, litigation, scientific uncertainties and competing demands by environmental groups that have a financial stake in specific species.

California brown pelicans are overdue for delisting, Everett said. His council, a non-profit conservation group of about 30 scientists around the world, asked federal and state wildlife agencies to determine if the birds still are endangered. Everett said evidence of their recovery is clear along the Southern California shoreline, where the pelicans are so common that beachgoers and anglers might consider them a nuisance.

“I have to believe that the public, if they are told that the birds are endangered, would have to be scratching their heads,” Everett said.

#### Icon of the ecosystem

In the public consciousness, California brown pelicans are linked to the state's coast like grizzly bears are to Alaska and salmon are to the Northwest. The birds are known for their large gulleets and their wingspan, which can reach 7 feet.

Visit beaches in San Diego County this time of year and they'll likely be perched on pier posts.

“They are a symbol of the offshore ecosystem,” said Daniel Anderson, a pelican expert at the University of California Davis. “If you see pelicans, . . . it feels like things are good out there.”

And if you don't see pelicans, it might be a sign that something is drastically wrong.

The plight of California brown pelicans started about 50 years ago, generated by pollution from a few powerful pesticides such as DDT that built up in the coastal food chain. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons and other birds also were affected by the chemical.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the Montrose Chemical Plant discharged hundreds of tons of DDT into Los Angeles County sewers that drained to the Pacific Ocean, state records show. The company also dumped hundreds of tons of DDT-laced waste near Santa Catalina Island.

DDT made its way into the diet of pelicans, which mainly eat anchovies and other small fish. The chemical collected in the birds' fatty tissues and had a disastrous effect: It caused pelican eggshells to be so frail that they were crushed by the weight of their brooding parents.

In 1970, the California subspecies gained federal safeguards under the precursor to the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't know the historic population peak for brown pelicans, but it said that in 1969, only four pelicans fledged from roughly 1,100 nests in the Channel Islands.

DDT was banned nationwide in 1972, starting the recovery for the birds. Pelicans also benefited from reduced pressure on their breeding grounds thanks to fishing and access restrictions in the Channel Islands.

Fourteen years later, conservationists at the Pacific Seabird Group told the Fish and Wildlife Service that the birds deserved the “positive step” of being moved from endangered to threatened status. That never happened.

Today, there are some 9,000 California brown pelican nests in the Channel Islands, according to a state document. That's roughly triple what the federal government's recovery plan called for in 1983.



*PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune*

*Chris Schoneman, manager of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, showed the cages where injured birds are treated.*

Such success doesn't mean the pelicans lead an easy life. They are susceptible to many threats, including oils spills, decreases in food and entanglement in fishing gear.

“Some of the pelicans . . . are beyond hope; hooks have punctured eyes, torn gaping holes in pouches, and caused untreatable infections,” said a 2001 report by the Fairfield-based International Bird Rescue Research Center.

Pelicans also have been harmed by domoic acid, a nerve toxin produced by algae, and by botulism, a bacteria that activates in warm waters.

Schoneman and other bird rescuers cared for the stricken pelicans at the Salton Sea in 1996. Shortly afterward, the Fish and Wildlife Service built a small hospital next to the sea to care for diseased or injured birds in the area. It also started a monitoring program there to spot outbreaks early.

Small-scale die-offs still occur, but none has reached the levels of a decade ago.

“I like to think we have learned something since 1996 and prevented that terrible summer from happening again,” said Schoneman, now the project leader at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge.

Today, brown pelicans are plentiful on the shallow inland sea, where 6,000 were counted this year by wildlife officials. During a recent sunset, squadrons of the dark birds skimmed along the top of the water in V-formation. Their wingtips beat in rhythm and seemed to just miss touching the glassy surface as they flew to their resting spots for the night.

#### State protections

For some conservationists, the tale of the California brown pelican raises questions about how well state and federal agencies are keeping up with the plants and animals in their care.



*PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune*

*Shown at the Salton Sea, California brown pelicans are known for their large gullets and their wingspan, which can reach 7 feet.*

California maintains its own list of protected species based on similar criteria to the federal statute. But top state wildlife officials can't point to any species they've removed from the list because it has recovered sufficiently. Even the American peregrine falcon, taken off the federal list in 1999, remains classified as imperiled in California.

As for bald eagles, they met federal recovery standards roughly seven years ago but aren't expected to be moved off the Endangered Species Act list until February.

Reasons for the slow pace are biological, financial and legal. Delisting efforts can upset some conservation groups while pleasing others, meaning the process can get stuck in court.

Environmentalists might be concerned about losing funding for their work if a species is delisted. Or, they may dislike losing the legal leverage over activities such as logging that come with protected species.

Disagreements also arise over the biological status of a species and whether the animal or plant would continue progressing without federal safeguards.

Finally, agencies say they sometimes push delisting further down on their to-do lists because of court orders and other protection projects.

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman in Ventura said the decision on delisting California brown pelicans wasn't made years ago because "we have been using our resources to focus on other priorities." The agency has removed about one species annually in recent years.

That's not good enough for Everett, who worries that if Americans don't see the benefits of species protection laws, they'll support major changes that may reduce protections for plants and animals.

“As near as we can tell, (Fish and Wildlife) does not want to put any effort at all into de-listing species,” Everett said.

Mike Lee: (619) 542-4570; [mike.lee@uniontrib.com](mailto:mike.lee@uniontrib.com)

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/science/20061114-9999-1n14pelican.html>



## Pelican protection

California brown pelicans remain on the Endangered Species Act list, even though about 150,000 of them live along the West Coast and in Mexico. The species has been on state and federal protection lists since the 1970s, when pesticides and other threats caused its population to plummet.

- Current habitat range
- Historic breeding range
- Current breeding range

**In 1996, botulism killed approximately 1,100 brown pelicans at the Salton Sea.**

SOURCES: ESRI; TeleAtlas; Life on the Edge: A Guide To California's Endangered Natural Resources

MATT PERRY / Union-Tribune