



Kent Brunell carries rescued pelican.



Kent Brunell attempts to catch pelicans.
Renee Jones Schneider, Star

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Pelicans stay too long at their namesake lake

A retired veterinarian has come to the rescue of a small flock of pelicans that lost their way in Wright County. They are recovering in Roseville.

By Paul Levy, Star Tribune

Pelican Lake, frozen in December, was no place for pelicans, Kent Brunell knew. But as the retired veterinarian watched several emaciated and dehydrated birds with thick bills meander from the lake near Monticello into traffic, he wondered, why did the pelicans cross the road?

"I became suspicious when I saw these wild birds -- birds that don't like to be near people -- on the road, not frightened by traffic," Brunell said Friday. "I wasn't sure how they got here, but they were obviously weakened and in trouble."

Stragglers during migration, nearly two dozen of these fascinating creatures have been sighted this week at Wright County's largest -- and aptly named, for its traditional sum-

mer residents -- lake. But with most of Pelican Lake's surface iced over, the pelicans, which need two pounds of fish per day to survive, are starving or freezing to death.

Brunell, 59, of Becker, first spotted two dead pelicans by Pelican Lake on Sunday while driving home from church. When he saw a third one alive by the shore, he captured the 3-foot-tall bird with a fishing net and transported it to the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Minnesota in Roseville.

He returned Wednesday, saw a group of pelicans drinking from an open area in the lake's southwest corner, and netted six more, taking all the starving, hypothermic birds to the private, nonprofit center. As of Friday morning, seven of the nine pelicans had survived.

After being nursed to health, the birds are expected to be flown commercially to their natural winter home on the Gulf Coast and released to the flock, said Phil Jenni, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center's executive director. Those that do not survive are being tested at the University of Minnesota Veterinary School's diagnostic lab.

Pelicans, which can have wingspans of more than 8 feet, often nest and hatch their eggs in western Minnesota, the Dakotas and southern Manitoba, Jenni said. They're known to frequent areas of open water, where they scoop up fish and then let water drain through their inflatable sievelike lower bills.

Two years ago, nearly 30,000 pelicans mysteriously vanished in south-central North Dakota, leaving their nests at the Chase National Wildlife Refuge. About 19,000 returned in the spring of 2005, and 9,000 chicks were hatched. By midsummer, most of the chicks had died and most of the adults had flown off, baffling experts.

Jenni and Brunell, a frequent contributor to the Wildlife Center in Roseville, don't find this week's pelican sightings in Minnesota as mysterious. Most of the birds appear to be young ones that lost their way, congregated around the warm open water near power plants and then became confused and hungry when the water began to freeze, Jenni said.

Birds that are injured or slowed by disease are sometimes left behind at migration time. That may have been the case with some of these birds, Jenni said.

Brunell knew the second he saw them that the wobbly birds were in trouble. And he knew where to take them. Capturing and transporting them was the hard part.

On Friday, after Brunell slipped and slid over the ice and netted one pelican, the near-frozen bird died in his arms while he tried to keep it warm.

"Call me back in 10 minutes," Brunell said from his cell phone minutes later. "I've got two in my arms right now. I don't want to lose them."

The birds weighed about 8 pounds apiece, slightly more than half of their healthy weight, he said. A few of the pelicans at the Wildlife Center have wing injuries, Jenni said.

The center, which treats 8,600 wild animals a year, has treated pelicans before, though never this many at once, he said.

"It can be expensive for a nonprofit like this," Jenni said. "Two pounds of fish a day for each pelican ... That's a lot of fish."

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White pelican breeding areas, migration routes and areas, non-breeding areas and year round areas in North America. Inset of Pelican Lake, Minnesota.