



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist
A brown pelican, more at home in Mexico than Victoria, prepares for takeoff at Clover Point.

Avian tourists show up on our shores

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Some wayward tourists have dropped into the Victoria area from California and Mexico over the last few weeks.

But brown pelicans don't do so well in the cold, and didn't bring along enough food in their 11-litre bags.

The large birds, on the U.S. endangered species list, are straying north to Greater Victoria.

The pelicans are 1.3 metres long and known for their pouches that can hold two or three times more than their stomachs. They are "plunge divers," dropping from the sky into the water with wings partly folded. The bill and pouch are used like a net to scoop up fish and water.

A pelican spotted a few weeks ago at the Goldstream marina died from apparent exposure and starvation.

The bird "couldn't figure how to get out of here and couldn't get food. He was pretty emaciated when they found him," said Darren Copley, a naturalist at Goldstream Park, located at the southernmost part of Saanich Inlet.

Another pelican, seen yesterday at Goldstream Park, appeared to be faring better.

School groups touring the park were surprised to see the pelican up the Goldstream River, a shady spot between mountains that's a sharp contrast to the wide-open sea of the pelican's natural habitat.

"It was really a surprise he wandered up that narrow river," said Copley.

"We've had more [pelicans] than normal up the Strait of Juan de Fuca," he said. "We do see them off the west coast in August during the post-breeding dispersal."

Mike Yip, a birder and author from Nanoose Bay, said brown pelicans turned up in the annual Christmas bird count, particularly in the Sooke area.

"There have been some regular sightings over the past month to six weeks. They do eat fish, and I think that's the secret [to surviving winter] is if they can keep catching fish."

The pelican isn't the only non-native bird that has visited Goldstream Park. A tufted puffin was spotted in the parking lot one day, said Copley.

Perhaps these birds just take a wrong turn and can't find an easy way out to the open sea, he suggested.

The number of different species showing up "probably has got to do with warmer ocean temperatures. We are seeing a lot more of the southern species.

"We've been watching a couple of trumpeter swans, which we don't normally get in the estuary, and the eagles are a little bit confused by it. We've had fewer eagles out on the ground on the estuary [yesterday] and the only thing that's different is these two big trumpeter swans."

Yip also has seen a number of non-indigenous birds on the Island.

"I found a tropical kingbird around Fairwinds [Nanoose Bay area] in October. That bird is native to Mexico, southern Arizona and southern Texas."

Yip saw a lesser nighthawk 80 kilometres offshore last summer, a bird that normally lives in the deserts of southern California, Arizona and New Mexico. He has also spotted a cattle egret, a native to southern grasslands.

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