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Pelicans bounce back

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A decade ago, things looked bleak for the Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* in South India. Excellent community-based conservation work by NGOs in the region, coupled with improved protection of breeding sites, has turned the pelican's fortunes around.

In the 1920s, more than a million Spot-billed Pelicans were believed to exist in South and South-East Asia. But by the 1990s the number had dropped to fewer than 12,000 birds, and the species was listed as Vulnerable. The decline was largely caused by conversion of wetlands and loss of nesting sites.

In South India, a slow recovery of the pelican population is taking place. Between them, the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu support 21 breeding colonies, and numbers are on the increase.

The pelicanry at Kokkare Bellur, Karnataka, has doubled in size to 400 pairs in recent years, and two new small breeding colonies have been established in the state. In Tamil Nadu the number of nesting colonies has increased from six to 14 in recent years, several of them with more than 250 nests. In Andhra Pradesh, pelicanries at Nelapattu and Uppalapadu each support more than 300 nests.

This recent increase is largely due to better levels of protection for the species. In Tamil Nadu most colonies are found on partially submerged stands of *Acacia nilotica* grown in village irrigation tanks under the Social Forestry Programme. Eight of them enjoy State protection.

Coupled with this has been community-based conservation work at several pelicanries, like those at Kokkare Bellur (Mysore Amateur Naturalists, Mysore, Karnataka, headed by K. Manu) and Uppalapadu (Care for Nature's Creatures, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, headed by K. Mrutyumjaya Rao). Overall, pelican numbers in South India have risen from fewer than 4,000 individuals, to perhaps 6,000 birds—a welcome success story.

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Otto Pfister  
Spot-billed Pelicans nest in trees adjacent to wetlands