

Lake owners have bellyful of pelicans

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Fly-fishing is a popular method of catching trout. It involves waving a \$600 graphite fly rod over the head until the sharp hook of the artificial fly lodges in the angler's ear. Then his friends drive him directly to a medical clinic. Unless there's a bar along the way.

Another method consists of plunging your head into water and coming up with the trout in your mouth. That style is favored by pelicans because, according to biologists, the great birds don't have \$600 to spend on a fly rod.

Today, on a small lake in this small town, just as they've done every day since they arrived a few years ago, the white pelicans will be trout fishing. This ruffles the feathers of the owners of private Ice Lake. They're real-estate developers who buy the live trout for \$2 a pound to stock their lake and are trying to sell lakefront homesites - a 3-acre lot sells for \$275,000 - to fly-fishermen and other lovers of the outdoors.

But a single pelican, a large-jawed bird with a 9-foot wingspan, can eat three trout a day. At times as many as 65 of the pelicans have been seen on the lake. And while many anglers practice a catch-and-release philosophy, pelicans are from the old catch-and-digest school.

The pelicans have kicked off a great debate among the property owners, the bird-loving Audubon folks and state and federal wildlife officials.

The commotion began after the owners, on May 2, filed an application with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a permit allowing them to kill pelicans.

To bird lovers, the idea is ridiculous.

"Their website calls the place 'Lakeside Preserve,'" said Audubon Colorado spokesman Ken Strom. "It's ironic that a place that bills itself as a bird sanctuary would think of killing pelicans. I wonder what the people who buy those properties would think when they found out they were living on a pelican graveyard."

Lakeside Preserve's sales literature says this: "Waterfowl and wildlife abound in and around the property, including some of the best trout fishing and bird watching in the state."

One of the three principal owners, Colorado Springs real-estate broker Gordy Riegel, said Monday that he had no idea his group had filed for a federal permit to kill the pelicans.

"That doesn't sound like something we'd do, and it's not something I'd ever like to see," he said.

But hours later, he said the filing was done so the group could seek financial reimbursement for the lost trout.

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman said that won't happen.

"We don't reimburse for damage from migratory birds," John Cornely said.

"Colorado Division of Wildlife doesn't, either. If you set the table for pelicans with a shallow pond filled with trout, they're going to find it and eat them. That's what they do. There's no compensation for that."

The application was filed by one of Riegel's partners, Doug Green, whose father bought the property a mile from the downtown area of Buena Vista in the 1960s.

"I'm a bird-watcher and a bird lover and have many bird feeders at my own house," Green said. "And I've put up duck houses at the lake for the birds to breed. We love the birds. I want to be clear on that. We have a bird sanctuary in Buena Vista."

So what's with the application for the so-called depredation permit?

"We want to scare them off," Green said. "If we can resolve this problem with nonlethal means like firecrackers, great. If not, well, I can't speculate. I know I won't kill one illegally."

Cornely of the federal Fish and Wildlife Service has a hunch that the pelicans, not endangered or threatened but protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, are safe.

"We've issued pelican depredation permits in Colorado in just a few cases involving fish hatcheries where people profit directly from selling the fish," he said. "But we don't issue them to enhance sport fishing. And real-estate sales wouldn't qualify for the permit."

The application review will take three or four weeks.

"I don't want to shoot the pelicans," said property owner Green. "I'm a hunter. I'd never shoot anything I couldn't eat."

And what, would he imagine, does a pelican taste like?

"I bet," he said with a touch of anger, "they taste like trout."

His trout.

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