

2 Rising numbers of American White Pelicans in Illinois: a perspective

By Sheryl DeVore

I remember years ago watching American White Pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) fishing in a circle at the Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. I looked forward to this experience whenever I visited the panhandle state, because, after all white pelicans could rarely be found in Illinois.

Today, Illinois birders know better. The white pelican can be found in large numbers in spring and fall on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers and along locks and dams in the prairie state. And as reported in the *Meadowlark*, the American white pelican was confirmed breeding at the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge in Illinois in 2009. It was the first time this species had been documented as a breeder in the state.

American White Pelicans have been mentioned in Illinois by ornithologists for at least a century. Robert Ridgway in "The ornithology of Illinois" wrote that the species passed through the state in April and late September through early October. H. David Bohlen in his 1989 book, "The Birds of Illinois" labeled the white pelican an occasional migrant in western Illinois and a rare migrant elsewhere in the state, rarely if ever seen in spring, sometimes in summer and most often in fall. The largest number of pelicans he mentions is 291 at the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge in October 1985.

The numbers began to grow, and by the autumn of 1993, just a year after the Illinois Ornithological Society was founded, pelicans were spotted in flocks of 200, 300, and even 710 along the Mississippi River during fall. Twenty years of field notes in *Meadowlark* show the pelican's continual rise over the past two



American White Pelicans in Illinois. April 2005.

Photo by Travis Mahan.

decades. In 2007, observers reported 3,000 at Lake Chautauqua in August in Mason County, and 8,000 at Carlyle Lake in Clinton County in October. Sigurd and Richard Bjorklund tallied a record number of white pelicans for Illinois, 18,071, at Lake Chautauqua on 10 October 2009.

In his 1993 breeding season report written for *Meadowlark*, Vernon Kleen wrote, "Watch for this species to establish a nesting colony in Illinois." His prediction came true in 2009 when the American white pelican successfully raised young on an island on the Mississippi River at the Illinois/Iowa border. Six chicks were reported in Illinois on June 17, 2009, and 25 chicks were reported by July 15. White pelicans have also recently established breeding colonies in Wisconsin at Cat Island near Green Bay and at Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge with 13-500 breeding pairs in two locations. A new breeding colony of white pelicans was also discovered in the early 1990s in south-central Minnesota.

Why are these birds changing their migratory patterns and beginning to breed in Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota? Some researchers have suggested that pelican populations have been increasing over their entire range and are now searching for more places to breed. But why have their numbers increased? Is it due to climate change – does the warming of the earth at least for now offer a benefit to these huge creatures? Have habitat changes created more ideal places for these birds to raise young?

This phenomenon is not yet understood, but one fact is for certain, the rise in populations of American White Pelicans in Illinois has been documented right here in the pages of *Meadowlark*. The information is readily available as ornithologists research the change in population status of this bird, and for that matter, all the other birds that have been mentioned in field notes and articles in this 20-year-old journal.

It's exciting to think about the trends that will occur in another 20 years, and that all of you who observe birds, write about them and send data to be published in *Meadowlark*, will contribute to knowledge about the state's avifauna.

Two years ago, I enjoyed watching American White Pelicans—dozens of them—feeding and resting on the Chain O'Lakes in Lake County. I never would have guessed 20 years ago that I'd be standing near my home observing these "Florida" birds. What will we know in another 20 years about all the birds that call Illinois home?

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