



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



The Pelican Can

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“The pelican possesses one of the most bizarre beaks as it comes with a fish bucket attached.” [Mark Trail, (Jack Elrod) October 11, 2020]

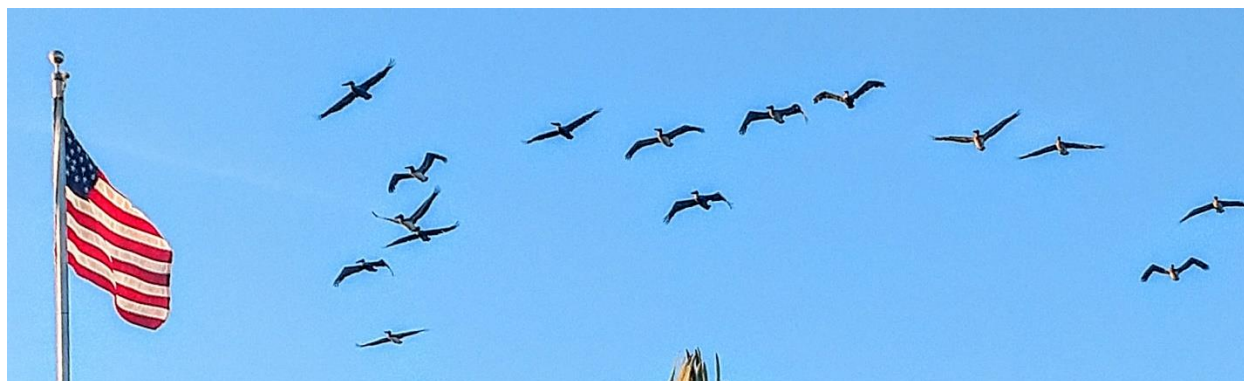
Fact #1. I have never seen a pelican in my yard. Fact #2. I never knew there were two kinds of pelicans: White and Brown. I've only seen the brown though a white bird that big could be hard to miss. No need to describe this bird for that pouch is unmistakable. (And Sibley shows that they could fly into this area, coming up from the Midwest into western New York. Well, who knows?) Sorry, but Golden Guide places them in the Midwest and on westward but not here. “Islands/lakes” does not seem to include the Greats.

Either pelican is considerably larger than our cormorants (60” wing span for the latter, 90” for the white and an awesome 110” for his brown cousin). Great fishers, I suspect they would not be welcomed around here.

It's the pouch formed by its flexible tongue inside that makes the bucket the bird uses to catch fish and sometimes (which surprised me) rainwater. Among the heaviest of flying birds, air pockets in their skeleton and underneath the skin enable it to float high. Those same air sacs add to the buoyancy when the bird is in the water as well as protecting it when the bird dives from flight into the water or near the surface to catch a fish. They fly hundreds of kilometers each day to get their fish and may dive from heights of sixty-some feet.

Gulls have been observed standing on the head of a pelican, pecking it unmercifully until the pelican opens its mouth. Then the gull grabs the fish and vamooses.

Fossils provide evidence that the pelican dates back at least thirty million years. Gregarious birds, they travel in flocks, cooperate in hunting and breed in colonies. Pairs are monogamous only for one breeding season though, even then, this bond extends only to the nesting site. Away from the nest, the male is “independent”.



Allow me to quote from Wikipedia (who else?): Incubation takes 30-36 days; hatching success for undisturbed pairs can be as high as 95%, but because of sibling competition or siblicide, in the wild, usually all but one nestling dies within the first few weeks. "Both parents feed their young. Small chicks are fed by regurgitation; after about a week, they are able to put their heads into their parents' pouches and feed themselves. Sometimes before, but especially after being fed, the pelican chick may seem to 'throw a tantrum' by loudly vocalizing and dragging itself around in a circle by one wing and leg, striking its head on the ground or anything nearby and the tantrums sometimes end in what looks like a seizure that results in the chick falling briefly unconscious; the reason is not clearly known, but a common belief is that it is to draw attention to itself and away from any siblings who are waiting to be fed.



"Parents of ground-nesting species sometimes drag older young around roughly by the head before feeding them. . . They are mature at three or four years old . . . Pelicans live for 15 to 25 years in the wild, although one reached an age of 54 in captivity."

Alcatraz Island got its name by the Spanish because of the large numbers of brown pelicans nesting on it. The word "alcatraz" is itself derived from the Arabic "al-caduos," a term used for a water-carrying vessel and likened to the pouch of a pelican. Albatross is also derived by a corruption of the same Spanish word.

I used to gaze out at Alcatraz Island from my living room as frequently as I now check my tiny lakes, never dreaming why that land in San Francisco Bay was so named by the Spanish.

My records never mentioned Alcatraz but list my first sighting of the American White on Upper Klamath Lake in California with the Brown in Aruba (3-29-99) though I noted "hardly a first though we sailed close to them on buoys. I certainly have no trouble identifying them."

In medieval Europe, the pelican was thought to be particularly attentive to her young, to the point of providing her own blood by wounding her breast when no other food was available. This may have arisen because there are times when it can look like the pelican is stabbing herself with her bill but, really, she only presses it onto her chest to fully empty the pouch. Nice story though.

The brown pelican is the national bird of Saint Kitts and Nevis, Barbados, and Sint Maarten. It is also the state bird of Louisiana, known as the Pelican State and mascot of the New Orleans NBA team.

I had always given the credit to Ogden Nash. Perhaps some of you did as well but it's Dixon Lanier Merritt who wrote the limerick in 1910:

A wonderful bird is the pelican
His bill will hold more than his belican,
He can take in his beak
Food enough for a week,
But I'm damned if I see how the helican.