

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*



Folk Name: Rough-billed Pelican

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare to Rare

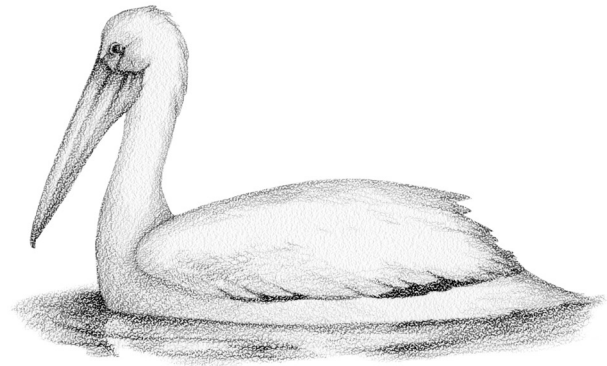
Habitat: Open water, rivers, lakes

In 1907, Charlottean J.H. Bigham witnessed an unusual sight—a sight so startling it made it into the headlines of the local *Evening Chronicle* newspaper. Bigham operated Sloan's Ferry, a busy ferry that carried people, livestock, horse and buggies, and even automobiles, back and forth across the Catawba River at the spot where Wilkinson Boulevard (U.S. Highway 74) crosses today. He was regarded as one of the most experienced ferry men who worked the local river crossings. He knew the river well and boasted he had transported thousands of passengers and had even “crossed” one passenger 800 times in a single year, earning him a tidy total sum of \$75. However, despite working on the river for many years, Bigham had never encountered anything like this.

On October 2, 1907, he watched as a giant, misshapen white bird with a ten- to twelve-foot wingspan flew slowly up the river. He immediately understood that nothing like it had ever been seen here before and he quickly secured a gun. Bigham succeeded in shooting the bird and was able to collect its body for a close-up examination. It turned out to be an American White Pelican, and it was only the third time this species had been recorded in the state of North Carolina. His discovery made him famous for a time, but the fate of the specimen Bigham collected is unknown. In all likelihood, the bird was mounted and put on display because of its large size, rarity, and unusual appearance.

The status of the American White Pelican in North Carolina has dramatically changed since the time of this first Mecklenburg–Gaston county record. Through the end of the 1970s, the white pelican was considered a “very rare” visitor anywhere in North Carolina, and a count of five birds in 1986 was pronounced an “excellent” find. In the 1980s and 1990s, coastal sightings slowly became more common, but inland sightings of the white pelican in North Carolina were still “very rare” even into the late 1990s. Recently, reports of American White Pelicans along the coast of both Carolinas have noticeably increased, and flocks of 600 or more birds have been seen. Inland sightings have markedly increased within the past decade.

American White Pelicans were photographed in the Central Carolinas three times between 1979 and 1999. Sam Cathey discovered a lone American White Pelican on a small pond in Iredell County on November 17, 1979. The bird was photographed by Fred Weisbecker, a local



wildlife officer, and it stayed for a month before departing on December 16, 1979. There was some speculation that this bird was injured. Seven white pelicans were found on Governor's Island in Lincoln County on April 17, 1994. Mary Welty, a Charlotte wildlife photographer, took a photograph of them that was later featured on the cover of *Lake Norman* magazine. On November 16, 1998, Keith Watson, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, reported one American White Pelican had been found on Lake Norman along the Iredell–Mecklenburg county line.

There have been over 10 reports of American White Pelicans in the Central Carolina region since the turn of the twenty-first century. Many of these birds were seen at various points flying north or south along the lakes of the Catawba River and several other reports have come from the Yadkin River around High Rock Lake. An American White Pelican was sighted on Lake Norman in Lincoln and then Catawba County in mid-March 2000. A surprising flock of 10 were seen on Lake Hickory in Catawba County on May 14, 2003.

Several flocks of white pelicans were reported from below High Rock Lake in Rowan County: 10 were reported by Mike Axlerod on April 8, 2007, 12 were reported by Anthony Sharum on February 16, 2008, flocks of 16 and 26 were seen by Paul Hinkle on March 26 and 31, 2009, and Jeff Lemons found six there on March 3, 2010. Dwayne Martin photographed a pair of white pelicans sitting on a sandbar on Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba County on March 30–31, 2012, and had one more show up that fall on October 14, 2012. Rick Stamey found a flock of six perched on a rock in the middle of the Broad River in Cleveland County on May 31, 2013. Martin photographed one of the largest flocks of American White Pelicans ever recorded inland in the Carolinas. The flock, totaling an astounding 43 birds,

showed up on Lake Hickory on October 27, 2013.

Recent records include a Lincoln County sighting and a Gaston County report. Rob Loeffler was scanning the waters of Lake Norman from his dock in Lincoln County on April 12, 2015, when he noticed an unusual flock of large white birds. Intrigued, he jumped onto his Jet Ski and rode out into the lake where he photographed a flock of 15 American White Pelicans sitting on a shoal on the point of Governor's Island. At one point, the flock flew south towards Mecklenburg County, but they returned to

roost on the island again later that day. The flock was still active there the following day, and then they departed. On February 20, 2016, three American White Pelicans were reported heading north over Catawba Cove on Lake Wylie in Gaston County. Interestingly, Catawba Cove is about 3 miles south of the Sloan's Ferry crossing where Mecklenburg County's first white pelican was found over a century ago. Most recently, a flock of 20 was photographed near the dam on High Rock Lake on February 18, 2017.