

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*



Folk Name: Penguin

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very rare

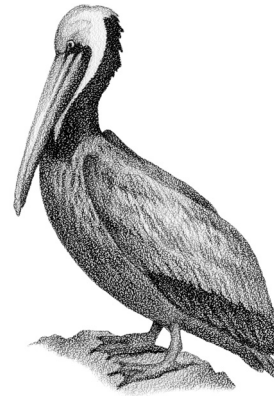
Habitat: Open water, rivers, lakes

A flock of Brown Pelicans cruising in a single-file line, inches above crashing ocean waves is one of the iconic images of today's Carolina beach experience. It may surprise many, however, to learn that this iconic bird was on the brink of extinction less than a half century ago. The widespread use of organochlorine pesticides had affected the Brown Pelican like it did the Bald Eagle and other predators at the top of their food chain. Biomagnification of this chemical in the fish the pelicans ate, resulted in the thinning of their egg shells. The shells became so thin they would break during incubation, and no young were successfully hatched.

In 1966, South Carolina ornithologist Theodore Beckett warned of serious steep declines in the state's population of Brown Pelicans, estimating a loss as high as 30% of breeding birds per year. He realized his estimate was a "shocking statement" but wondered if the "time for alarm" was "already too late"? His and other scientists' concerns were soon proven valid and in the 1970s, the Brown Pelican was listed as an endangered species at both the state and national levels. R.A. Stout writing in *The Gastonia Gazette* warned that "[w]ildlife which acts as a 'pollution barometer' and serves as an 'early warning system' for man has declined drastically in some areas. The Brown Pelican has all but disappeared as a breeding species. In a few short years, it may be listed as extinct." In 1977, North Carolina biologists published a comprehensive book titled *Endangered and Threatened Plants and Animals of North Carolina*. The cover photograph, chosen to exemplify the state's most endangered species, was a photograph of a Brown Pelican taken by Charlotte's native son, famous wildlife photographer Jack Dermid.

A nationwide ban on Dieldrin and DDT, along with decades of hard work by a variety of conservation groups, led to the eventual recovery of the Brown Pelican population. It gradually returned to sustainable levels in the Carolinas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the Atlantic Coast populations from the federal endangered list in 1985, and in North Carolina it was down-listed to a species of Special Concern and then down to Significantly Rare. On November 11, 2009, the Brown Pelican was officially taken off of the federal roster of endangered species across all of America.

Since the Brown Pelican is our native pelican, breeding along the coast of both Carolinas, it's a bit of a surprise



J F M A M J J A S O N D

that there are fewer records of it in the Central Carolinas than its larger western relative. There are three twentieth century records. The earliest report is from W.E. Joyner who found one on Lake Monroe in Union County, NC, on June 15, 1939. He observed the pelican for 3 hours while he was in a boat fishing. At one point, the bird came within 6 feet of him and pecked at his artificial plug in the water. A record published in the 1959 edition of *Birds of North Carolina* states "an inland record for Monroe is (June 1, 1940)." It is possible this is a mistake and this could simply be the 1939 record listed with an incorrect date. If not, a second Brown Pelican showed up near Monroe a year later and the authors overlooked its first published appearance. The third record is of a Brown Pelican found by Bill and Flo Cobey on Lake Wylie on June 19, 1971. This was the first record for Mecklenburg County and this surprising find was later modestly described as "an unexpected visitor."

Reports of Brown Pelicans on inland lakes in the Carolinas have been slowly increasing over the past two decades. A Brown Pelican was reported on Lake Wylie in



Brown Pelican on Lake Norman. (Chris Talkington)

York County on June 28–29, 2003, near the Buster Boyd Bridge. Another was found just south of there, near the mouth of Crowders Creek, the following year on April 23, 2004. Both of these birds probably flew up the river into Gaston and Mecklenburg County at some point during their stay.

A trio of Brown Pelicans were repeatedly seen and photographed by members of the local cat-fisherman's association on Lake Wylie in July 2010. Two poor quality photographs were posted online prompting this comment: "I fish Lake Wylie more than just about anyone, and I have never seen a pelican on Lake Wylie. If you did not have the picture I would swear you were tipping the bottle while fishing!!!" A few weeks later on August 16, 2010, Duke Power personnel working on the river sent excellent photographs of an immature Brown Pelican and exact coordinates of the bird's location on Lake Wylie, just west of Sadler Road in Mecklenburg County. A few months later on October 11, 2010, Suzanne Belanger found a Brown Pelican near Terry's Marina on Lake Wylie, 5 miles south of the Sadler Road sighting. This may have been the same bird lingering in the area.

A Brown Pelican was also photographed on High Rock Lake in Rowan County during the summer of 2010.

There are a half dozen recent records of Brown Pelican in the Central Carolinas. An immature bird was photographed roosting on channel marker T-4 near the North Harbor Club and I-77 on Lake Norman on September 6, 2012. The bird remained in that area for at least 6 days and was seen and photographed by many local birders. Jeff Robinson watched a Brown Pelican "cruising" over the Kings Mountain Reservoir in Cleveland County on April 20–21, 2013. Mark Stanback watched a Brown Pelican fly in and land on Davidson College lake right in front of him while he was standing on the pier on May 16, 2014. Chris Talkington and Jake Haney spied a Brown Pelican on February 25, 2015, "fishing with a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls" on Lake Wylie at the Buster Boyd Bridge. On May 17, 2015, Bob Wood watched a pair of Brown Pelicans diving for fish in Lake Wateree in Fairfield County, SC, about 8 miles south of Lancaster County. On December 16, 2017, Steve Tracy, Christy Hill, and David Schroder photographed one flying over Robinwood Lake in Gaston County.