



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Sacramento Fish & Wildlife Office  
Species Account  
CALIFORNIA BROWN PELICAN  
*Pelecanus occidentalis californicus*



CLASSIFICATION: Proposed for delisting  
Federal Register 73:9407; February 20, 2008 [TEXT](#) | [PDF](#)



For listing history, see 5-year review, section I.C.2  
[http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five\\_year\\_review/doc1039.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc1039.pdf)

The species *Pelecanus occidentalis* is currently designated as endangered in the entire U.S., except the Atlantic coast, Florida and Alabama. After conducting a 5-year review of the species, we have proposed that it be delisted. The brown pelican is well distributed throughout its known historic range. Even the most conservative, available estimates indicate that its global population size is large, consisting of hundreds of thousands of individuals.

CRITICAL HABITAT: Not designated

RECOVERY PLAN: The California Brown Pelican Recovery Plan, February 3, 1983. (This plan is now outdated. Contact our office if you need a copy.)

## DESCRIPTION

Brown Pelicans are large birds. Adults weigh about 2-5 kilograms. (About 4.5-11 pounds) Their wingspan is over 2 meters. (About 6.5 feet) Males are larger than females.

Brown Pelicans are smaller than white ones, but CA Brown Pelicans are larger than other browns. Brown Pelicans have keen eyesight. As they fly over the ocean, they can spot a school of small fish, or even a single fish. Diving steeply into the water, they come up with a mouthful of fish. Air sacs beneath their skin cushion the impact and help them come to the surface.

Adults are large, grayish-brown birds with long, pouched bills. They have a white or yellowish head and dark body. Immature birds are dark with a white belly.

Brown Pelicans make spectacular headfirst dives into the water to catch fish. They have long bills with big pouches for catching and holding the fish. In California, they feed on sardines, mackerels and anchovies.

Pelicans breed in colonies on islands without mammal predators. They build nests of sticks on the ground. All courtship happens at the nest site.

Normal clutch size is three eggs. These are laid in March or April. Both parents take turns sitting on the eggs and feeding the chicks.

Adults have few predators. Once in a while, a shark will attack when they dive. The main threat is to eggs. Other birds, raccoons, cats and dogs are some of the egg predators.

## DISTRIBUTION

Non-breeding CA Brown Pelicans range from the Gulf of California to southern British Columbia. They nest on islands in the Gulf of California and along the coast to West Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands. They are rarely seen either inland or far out at sea. See review at [ecos.fws.gov/docs/five\\_year\\_review/doc1039.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc1039.pdf) for detailed, up-to-date distribution information.

## THREATS

Pelicans depend on anchovies and sardines. These have declined due to over-fishing. The number of chicks born each year also varies depending on [El Niño](#) and other climate changes. Pelicans are also threatened by the oil spills, entanglement with hooks and fishing line, and disease outbreaks from overcrowding.

However, the biggest threat to Brown Pelicans was the pesticide DDT. Brown Pelicans were listed as endangered in 1970. DDT was banned in 1972. By 1985, Atlantic Coast Brown Pelicans had recovered significantly. They were removed from the endangered species list. Now, we feel that pelicans in other places, including California, have recovered too.

## REFERENCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NOTE: There is a special CA brown pelican species account for 4th, 5th and 6th grade students. See [www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/animal\\_spp\\_acct/ca\\_brown\\_pelican\\_kf.htm](http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/animal_spp_acct/ca_brown_pelican_kf.htm)

Brown Pelican fact sheet - [www.fws.gov/home/feature/2008/pdf/brown\\_pelicanbio.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/home/feature/2008/pdf/brown_pelicanbio.pdf)

Brown Pelican Proposed Delisting Questions and Answers - [www.fws.gov/home/feature/2008/pdf/BrownPelicanQsAsFINAL.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/home/feature/2008/pdf/BrownPelicanQsAsFINAL.pdf)

Thelander, C. ed. 1994. Life on the edge: a guide to California's endangered natural resources. BioSystem Books. Santa Cruz, CA. p 132-135.

See review at [ecos.fws.gov/docs/five\\_year\\_review/doc1039.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc1039.pdf) for an extensive list of references.

Credits: Brown pelican, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service photo

Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office  
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2605  
Sacramento, California 95825  
Phone (916) 414-6600  
FAX (916) 414-6713

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