



## The Brown Pelican on Mobile Bay

**DESCRIPTION:** The brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) is a fairly large water bird weighing up to eight pounds and can have a wing span of over seven feet. The adult is dark grey to silver in coloration, with a white and brown head and a light yellow crown. Juveniles are grey-brown all over with white under parts. Pelicans have long bills with an expandable pouch that is three times the size of their stomach, short legs and webbed feet.

The brown pelican and the American white pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) are the only pelican species that occur in Alabama. Five other species inhabit various habitats throughout the world. Brown pelicans are the smallest member of the pelican family and are known for their low soaring over the water's surface and diving after their prey.

**DISTRIBUTION:** The brown pelican has a large range extending from North America to South America.

**HABITAT:** Strictly a coastal species that is rarely seen inland or far out at sea. Pelicans make extensive use of sand bars, offshore sand bars, and islets for nocturnal roosting and daily loafing, especially by non-breeders and during the non-nesting season. However, some roosting sites may eventually become nesting areas.

**FEEDING HABITS:** Brown pelicans forage in shallow estuarine and inshore waters, usually close to the coastline. Pelicans look for their prey from the air and then dive into the water to capture it in their expandable pouch. The water is drained from the pouch and then food is swallowed. Pelicans feed on menhaden, mullet, sardines, pinfish, herring, grass and top minnows, anchovies and some crustaceans.

**LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY:** Brown pelicans nest in colonies, mostly on coastal islands (protection from predators such as raccoons), often with other shore birds such as herons, terns and gulls. Nests are large, flat and created in trees, tops of bushes or found on the ground. Nesting material is brought to the nesting site and the female constructs a nest of interwoven sticks lined with grass or reeds.

Two to three chalky white eggs are laid March thru April that are soon covered in guano as a predator defense. Both males and females share in incubating eggs and chick rearing. Eggs are incubated for 28-30 days and chicks are born pink, naked and helpless. About 35 days after hatching chicks can walk out of nests but do not leave until they are about 63 days of age. Young can usually fly 74 to 76 days after hatching.

Brown pelicans are considered a long-lived species as one banded in Brevard, Florida was banded in 1933 and was captured in 1964, 31 years old.

Populations of brown pelicans (especially in California, Texas, and Louisiana) were decimated in the U.S. by pesticides (DDT and related compounds) in the 1950s and 60s. In the U.S. Caribbean, 7% of