

## THE AUSTRALIAN PELICAN



The Australian Pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, is a large water bird, widespread on the inland and coastal waters of Australia and New Guinea, also in Fiji, parts of Indonesia and as a vagrant to New Zealand.

The species was first described by the Dutch naturalist Coenraad Jacob Temminck in 1824. Its specific epithet is derived from the Latin verb *conspicere* 'to perceive', hence 'conspicuous'.

By pelican standards the Australian Pelican is of medium-size, being 1.6 to 1.8m (5.3-6 feet) long with a wingspan of 2.3 to 2.5 m (7.6-8.3 feet) and weighing 4 to 13kg (9-29 lb). It is a predominantly white bird with black along the primaries of the wings. The pale, pinkish bill is enormous, even by pelican standards, and is the largest bill in the avian world. The largest bill on record is 49cm (19.5") long.

Australian Pelicans prefer large expanses of open water without too much aquatic vegetation. The surrounding environment is unimportant: it can be forest, grassland, desert, estuarine mudflats, an ornamental city park, or industrial wasteland, the only provision being that there is enough open water capable of supporting a sufficient supply of fish.

There is no particular schedule of regular movement, they simply follow the availability of food. When the normally barren Lake Eyre filled during 1974 to 1976, almost the whole Australian population of pelicans migrated to its shores, with only a handful remaining around the coastal cities. When the inland lakes dried again, the population dispersed once more. Flocks of thousands were seen on the northern coasts and some individuals even reached Christmas Island, Palau and New Zealand.

The Australian Pelican commences breeding at two to three years of age. The breeding season is governed by locality. In tropical areas (north of 26°S) it occurs in winter. In the southern parts of Australia breeding commences in late spring. While in inland areas, any time after rainfall is usual. The nest is a shallow depression in earth or sand, sometimes with a grass lining. On Lake Alexandrina in South Australia grassy platforms are constructed. They are communal nesters, with colonies located on islands or sheltered areas near lakes or the sea. The usual clutch is one to three chalky-white eggs measuring 93 x 57mm. These often become scratched and dirty. After hatching, the larger chick will be fed more, and the smaller one(s) eventually die of starvation or siblicide. For the first two weeks the chicks are fed a regurgitated liquid, but for the remaining two months they are fed fish such as the introduced European carp, and some invertebrates.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia