

VOCALIZATION IN THE WHITE PELICAN

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A. C. Bent (1922) called the White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) "particularly silent birds." Neither Roger Tory Peterson (1947) nor Robbins, Bruun, and Zim (1966) make any mention of voice for the White Pelican in their popular field guides. Elsewhere, Peterson (1961) calls the adults "virtually silent." Skinner (1917) stated that "the old pelicans never make a sound." Bent (op. cit.) cites Dr. P. L. Hatch, writing in 1892, as saying they make a loud, difficult-to-describe call from great heights in the sky. However, neither Bent (op. cit.) nor Palmer (1962) could find any other references to calls from adults away from the breeding colony.

It would appear from the above that adult pelicans are normally silent birds, at least away from the breeding grounds. I was therefore surprised on May 17, 1967 to hear a low grunt from at least one of two pelicans which flew overhead, just above tree level, as I stood on the well-treed ridge along the south shore of Lake Manitoba at the University of Manitoba Field Station at Delta, Manitoba. Although pelicans frequently fish along Lake Manitoba, the nearest known breeding colony to Delta is at East Shoal Lake (Lies and Behle, 1966; Anderson and Bartonek, 1967), approximately 36 miles distant.

The sound I heard was not a loud call like that described by Hatch, and was not made at a high altitude. It was more like the "grunt" call described in the literature for the adults on the breeding grounds (and also heard by Dr. Roger M. Evans and myself at a colony on Dog Lake, Manitoba on June 11, 1967). These calls have been described by Bent (1922) as "low-toned grunts" or "subdued croaking." He cites Chapman as calling this "a deep voiced, not loud,

murmuring groan", Grinnell as referring to it as "a grunting quack", and Audubon as likening it to a sound "produced by blowing through the bunghole of a cask." Peterson (1961) calls it a "low groan." Schaller (1964) found these "murmuring grunts" to be quite common at the colony. He also heard "loud nasal ho-ho-hos" and grunts during displays of nest relief ceremonies, and "loud harsh grunts" during copulation between adults and attempted copulations of young by adults. It may be noted that Bent (op. cit.) says the grunt call is "not audible at great distance." As the pelican often "soars at great heights" (Robbins et al., op. cit.), they may call more than is generally supposed away from the breeding colony, but their calls may not be heard by the human observer below.

In contrast to the adults, young pelicans are quite vocal. Skinner (1917) says they have "only a low grunt", but Bent (op. cit.) cites Dr. Chapman as saying they make "a low coughing whining grunt", which in a chorus "creates quite a volume of sound." Schaller (op. cit.) notes that young at hatching and one week old emit a "harsh kek-kek", but at about two weeks this becomes a "nasal waa-o, waa-o." In captivity the young have been known to give "low hoarse prologned sqawks" for "a few days" after capture (pers. comm. C. McGrath, fide V. Scott). That the young are strongly vocal at an early age was strikingly demonstrated on our visit to Dog Lake, where vocalizations similar to that described by Schaller (1964) for newly-hatched pelicans were heard emanating from pipped eggs.

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White Pelicans

Photo by Harold Hosford, Winnipeg