

WHITE PELICANS AT A NUISANCE GROUNDS

WILLIAM KOONZ, 1495 St. James Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba. R3H 0W9.

White Pelicans have been known to feed in normal fashion downstream from a power dam on the Saskatchewan River at its mouth on Lake Winnipeg at Grand Rapids, Manitoba, since shortly after the dam's completion in 1964. The nearest known breeding colony is at Kawinaw Lake, some 50 km southwest of Grand Rapids (53°10'N, 99°98'W). It contains approximately 2000 pairs of pelicans.

In recent years, pelicans have adopted the unique habit of foraging for fish and fish parts at a Grand Rapids nuisance grounds located on the steep banks and flat area above a water-retaining gravel pit some 4 km north of town. The pond is at least 10 ha in size with water levels 10 m or more below the top of the bank. I observed 10-15 birds in mid-September 1980 feeding along the road, on the slope and in the flat area where fish refuse had been thrown some time previously. It was a peculiar sight. Groups of 5-20 pelicans were also seen swimming in the pond at various times of day.

According to local game officers and fish hatchery personnel, pelicans in 1980 often flew directly to the refuse rather than landing on the pond to swim and walk up the steep slope to the food source, as had been the procedure in past years. This behaviour appears to be learned, as the number of birds observed at the nuisance grounds had increased yearly since the first being recorded some 3-5 years ago. In 1980 it was reportedly not uncommon to see 30-40 birds at almost any time of day feeding on the piles of fish refuse. The activity was, of course, related to fishing

seasons, amounts of effort by fishermen and the dumping of fish within the nuisance grounds. Some birds still flew into the pond and proceeded to walk up to the feeding areas. Others flew directly to the food, landing on the road or ground nearby. After feeding, the birds loafed on the site, flew away, or wandered down to swim or loaf on the pond. These pelicans have little regard for the state of their food, readily downing well decomposed material.

Several local phenomena have contributed to this unusual pelican foraging behaviour. The nuisance ground is near the dyke and dam site and alongside a sizable water-retaining gravel pit. Several similar pits were used in previous years for fish-rearing ponds as part of a provincial research project in conjunction with the Grand Rapids fish hatchery. Hatchery personnel told me that they suspected pelicans of foraging on numerous pickerel fry in these ponds. Fisheries research in the area is related to the fact that Grand Rapids has an economy based upon commercial fishing.

The use of discarded fish parts for food by White Pelicans does not appear to be a new phenomenon for Manitoba. A. C. Bent writes of his 1913 observations: "In the breeding colonies on Lake Winnipegosis the ground around the nests was strewn with large numbers of heads of pike and jackfish of great size; many of these must have belonged to fish weighing between twenty and thirty pounds; these large pike are very abundant in this lake, but I cannot understand how the pelicans could have caught such large fish or have



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G. W. Beyersbergen

transported them to the islands, yet I cannot see what else could have brought them there."¹ Lake Winnipegosis is some 60 km southwest of Grand Rapids. It is traditional for Manitoba's commercial fishermen to deposit rough fish waste on islands. Regulations prohibit dumping such waste into the water, while burying it is difficult. Fishermen simply transport the waste by boat to an island or uninhabited peninsula some distance from camp and dump it. These sources of fish wastes were either visited by

pelicans from the colonies observed by Bent in 1913 or the island colonies themselves were used as dumping grounds.

Waste fish foraging by White Pelicans on islands is not far removed from the foraging behaviour observed at the Grand Rapids nuisance grounds.

¹BENT, A. C. 1964 reprint. Life histories of North American petrels and pelicans and their allies. Dover Publ., Inc., New York.