

American White Pelicans in Manitowoc



Wisconsin History:

The American white pelican has always been in Wisconsin, but in small numbers. Going back as far as the 1600s, Jesuits reported seeing pelicans on the rapids of the Fox River. Overhunting and chemical effects from DDT negatively impacted the small population in the state. For over 100 years, there were no records of nesting American White Pelicans in Wisconsin. Finally, in 1994, a nest was found and documented in the lower Green Bay.

Where are the Pelicans coming from? The majority of the pelicans seen here are originating from the prairies: the Dakotas and Minnesota. In the mid-1990s, pelican colonies experienced hard times and some moved eastward to find suitable habitat and nesting opportunities. An eastward movement of this species has been happening since.

Are they nesting here?

The pelicans that we see in Manitowoc and the lakeshore area are not nesting, but rather considered a “floating population.” These are likely non-breeding birds. They are visiting different locales and foraging as they prepare for the southward migration. This will happen in late September and October.

Why are they in Manitowoc now? As the population is increasing and moving eastward, they are finding that the containment area in Manitowoc’s Harbor provides reasonable protection and is surrounded by an enormous supply of food.

What do they eat? The White Pelican can consume up to 4 pounds of shallow-water fish daily including: alewives, gizzard shad, carp, shiners, catfish, and suckers. They also dine on amphibians and crayfish. These are considered “rough” fish and not desirable to the commercial fishing industry.

Where do they go in the winter? The pelican migrates to the Gulf States, Mexico, and Central America.



Other interesting facts:

- Unlike their cousin, the Brown Pelican, they do not dive from the air to catch fish.
- Pelicans may feed communally by corralling schools of fish toward the shallows. The pelicans can then easily scoop up these corralled fish from the water.
- Pelicans are big birds that can overheat when they're out in the hot sun. They shed heat by facing away from the sun and fluttering their bill pouches—which contain many blood vessels to let body heat escape.
- A Green Bay-banded, migrating pelican wandered as far south as Bermuda for their first record, ever.

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