



by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 12: Seven Thousand Pelicans

“Plumpskin, buffskin, pelican, gee!
We think no bird so happy as we.
Plumpskin, buffskin, pelican jill!
We thought so then and we think so still.”

So runs an ancient and foolish ditty. There is something about it which makes one think of pelicans as doing a little dance and thus happily singing, wing in wing, so to speak. Observing the pelicans that meet the steamers at Jacksonville and some others later in captivity, I had thought them of a grave and reverend dignity which belied the ditty and its suggestions. Now I know better. It is a bachelor pelican that first gave me an inkling of “how happy the life of a bird must be.” He has no home, this bachelor pelican, just a habitat which is a tiny cove in the long island which bars the Indian River from the sea five or six miles below Fort Pierce. So deep does this cove dent the island that the roaring surf of the east side is but a stone throw from its tip, yet the wind which blows almost always from the sea leaves its surface unruffled. Here my bachelor pelican lives to sail and soar and cut capers all day long in a snug harbor which is untenanted save by a winter fisherman’s houseboat.

No more than he minded this houseboat did he seem to mind me as I watched his antics. At times he seemed severe and dignified enough. That was when he sat erect and motionless on the surface, his noble, white head and reverend beard of a bill having all the repose of a prophet. But that did not last long with him. With a shrug the dignity vanished and his whole attitude was positively humorous. The change would come suddenly, a sort of wink of



the whole body. Nor was this for me. He just seemed to wink to himself and say, "Humph, but wasn't that a solemn pose!" It is singular how dignity can become grotesque humor with a shrug, with this bachelor pelican. After his shrug began a little whirling motion as he sat on the water, spinning softly to the right and left, ogling the surface as if for fish. Then suddenly he sprang into the air. The pelican has hardly any tail. His huge beak ludicrously overweights him forward. By all laws of physics he ought to tumble head first into the waves every time he springs from them. Instead, his seven-foot spread of wings catches the air with vigorous grace and he is absolute master of the art of flight. So my bachelor friend held himself on level wings, then of a sudden pitched downward and drove that huge, misshapen beak into the water, about half of the bird going with it. I know by the way he smacked his mandibles that he took in a good-sized fish, probably a mullet, while beneath the surface.

The general color of this bird was a slaty brown, except for his head and whole neck, which was white, not showing even a tinge of any other color. Crossing the narrow strip of island and looking forth upon the sea I saw other pelicans flying in slant-lined flocks just within the breakers. These pelicans wasted no time in humorous antics. They flew in business-like fashion, skimming so low in the hollows of the waves that they sometimes disappeared. They took fish on the dive much as my bachelor friend had; but, whereas he seemed to do it with a schottische movement, there was no antic dance in their motions. They were in dead earnest. They were marked differently from my young friend, too, for these sea hunters were in full breeding plumage, their hind heads and necks being a rich, seal brown. They were hunting menhaden more than a score of miles from the young, being brooded in the grass nests in the big rookery on Pelican Island, and they had no time for humorous antics.

There is no accounting for what birds do. It is the custom, almost universal, in birddom to mate and breed in the spring of the year. Even in the tropics this holds good. The pelicans of the Gulf of Mexico breed in April, yet those of the East Coast begin their mating and flock to the single rookery, which is the nesting place of all East Coast pelicans, in November. Just below the twenty-eighth parallel of latitude there is in a sheltered bay in the Indian River a low, sandy island about three acres in extent. Here all East Coast pelicans breed, and have done so since man has known the Indian River. The pioneer birds who first chose this island chose wisely. The place is as far north as they dare breed for fear of cold, which would kill the young



birds. These are born naked and for the first few weeks of their existence die of cold even under ordinary temperature, if left unbrooded over fifteen minutes. Hence one or the other of the parent birds keeps the nest during that time. On the other hand, they wish to be as far north as they can for two reasons. One is that excessive heat kills the unprotected young as well as cold. Another is that the menhaden fishing is better up the coast than down. Any fish is good enough for the palate of the adult pelican, but for some reason the birds prefer to feed their young almost entirely on menhaden.

In October the breeding impulse comes to these East Coast birds and the stubby, brown mane grows along the backs of their long necks. Then they collect together in flocks of hundreds, up and down the coast, and begin to draw in toward the old home spot. Not, however, until all the clan has gathered do they bear down upon the island and take possession, coming in a multitude in the night as our Northern migrants come to their breeding places. Thus the night herons which winter in this region come to their rookeries in the Massachusetts cedar swamps. On a day early last November there were no pelicans on Pelican Island. On another day the warden whose ceaseless vigilance protects these birds during the nesting season from the depredations of mankind estimated that there were seven thousand there. But not all these pelicans were in breeding plumage or were there to breed. At the close of old home week the white-necked birds seem in the main to have departed, probably to take up the lightsome joys of bachelor existence like my friend in the cove. The others began nest building and placed some fifteen hundred nests on the three acre island. Then indeed began a carnival of Pelican growing which lasts each year until late June has brought the longest days, before the last young bird is full grown and the island is once more deserted. In fact, last year, though the breeding was finished by the usual time, the birds did not wholly leave the island and its vicinity the year through, but hung about in considerable numbers.

Pelican Island lies so low that an extra high tide works havoc among the nests, which are of necessity placed on the ground. There is one mangrove tree on all the island now, though it once was covered. The weight of nests and roosting birds seem to have combined, perhaps with other causes, to kill them out. The former habit of the pelicans was to build entirely in trees. Now, rather than leave their beloved island, they have become ground builders. Seen in the distance as the boat draws rapidly nearer, this island seems to be covered with a vast collection of gray driftwood, so close together are the brooding birds. I have seen driftwood-covered low islets on the Alaskan coast of Bering Sea which looked very like it. Again as you



come nearer the semblance changes, fifteen hundred white pelican polls lifted high on long necks to see what is coming give it the appearance of a field of daisies.

The time was when these pelicans that brood three thousand young birds in all stages from fresh-laid eggs to youngsters that can fly and are as big as their parents, could gauge exactly the distance at which a shotgun will kill. In those days, before the Department of Agriculture made this tiny islet a Government reservation, and through the efforts of the Audubon Society Warden Kroegel had been made its guardian, twelve thousand feet spread of pelican wings were in the air at shooting distance every time a boat approached. But pelicans are canny birds and they have now learned to sit tight. They simply lift their heads high, draw their feet up under them so as to be ready for a spring if need be, and look at you with all the vast dignity of which the bird is capable. The lightsome frivolity of my white-necked pelican down in the little cove is not for this place. Nor is there any look of real alarm in their wise and solemn old faces as I step out of the boat and walk slowly up among them.

A sudden motion will startle them into flight, but moving slowly enough one may approach almost within poking distance of the birds before they lift into the air and sail away. Truly it is an astonishing sight. On the higher parts of the little island, one great grass nest almost touches the next and there is hardly room for the brooding birds to take flight at the same time without rapping one another with their great wings. After a moment the general current of the life of the island goes on undisturbed by the presence of an undemonstrative visitor. Birds come and go, lifting their great, overbalanced bodies into the air with incredible ease and flapping away, sailing in from the distance and dropping with lifted wings to the desired spot.

The two birds alternate in seeking food and sitting upon the nest and seem to share equally in all care of the young. The ceremony of nest relief is sometimes a most curious thing. The approaching bird lights near the nest, points his bill high in air and draws nearer, wagging his head most comically from side to side. Thereupon the sitting bird sticks a long bill down into the nest, twitches half-raised wings nervously and croaks a hoarse word or two which might well be a complaint of weariness and cramps from long waiting. Then the two pause for a second and the sitting bird steps down off the nest in most unconcerned fashion, waddles a step or two, lifts into the air and is gone, probably to get a much needed menhaden dinner. The other bird then climbs up on the nest and takes up the labor of incubation or brooding. It is only after the chicks have grown the white down which precedes the real



feathers that they are left alone by the parents. There are many reasons for this. If the weather is cool they die of exposure to the cold; if it is hot the sun is equally fatal. But there is more to fear than this. Young pelicans after a certain stage of growth step down out of the nest and prowl about a bit between meals. Full-grown young have a way of gobbling up the newborn if unprotected by the presence of the mother.

In fact, the infant mortality on Pelican Island, even under its present halcyon condition of Government protection, is high. The pelican must be an awkward sitter. Addled eggs are to be found on the ground among the nests in considerable numbers. When the island was clothed with the low mangrove trees nesting conditions were much safer. Then the young birds did not leave the nest until about to fly, and the newly hatched were therefore better protected from being devoured by the neighbors' children. Moreover, the habit of wandering from the nest on the ground makes it difficult for parents to surely find their own offspring when they come back with food. Any mother with a neck full of fish is good enough for the youngsters, hence when a cargo arrives they all rush for it indiscriminately and the real offspring is lucky if he gets the luncheon. But the worst thing about the ground nesting is an occasional high tide which comes, driven by northeast winds, and floods the low portion of the island, sweeping large numbers of eggs and helpless young to disaster.

The pelican mother lays three eggs, pure white, about three inches by two in diameter, being thus slightly smaller than those of the Canadian goose. If for any reason the eggs of the



young birds are destroyed another litter is laid. Perhaps the frequent destruction of eggs or nestlings in the crowded communal life of the island accounts for the prolongation of the breeding season here. The eggs hatch in about four weeks, and it takes about ten weeks more for the young to acquire full flight plumage. Three and a half months should normally be all the time one pelican family would stay on the island. After that the young birds would roam

freely to fish with their elders. But as a matter of fact, from the laying of the first egg on the island to the departure of the last young bird is nearer seven months than three and a half. Of the seven thousand pelicans which come to the island at the beginning of the season, but three thousand actually have young there at any one time. What becomes of the other four thousand? Do they not breed that year? These are interesting questions for the ornithologists to answer by further careful observation. It seems to me that it is likely that those birds which



do not find a breeding place on the island in November return after the first brood of the more fortunate is off and occupy their places. The day that I was there, in the latter half of January, I saw a pelican carrying grass in his beak, evidently for nest building.

With the exception of that croak of recognition with which the sitting bird greets its relieving mate, the adult pelican is as silent as the severe dignity of the bird in repose would seem to warrant. With the young it is another matter. Pelican Island is anything but a silent place during the breeding season. Croaks, cries and squawks come from the young birds, at times rising to a considerable din. The young bird just pushing his beak through the shell does it with a grunt. The black, blind nestlings croak and the larger the bird the shriller his voice and the louder. To approach a nest when the old bird is off is to be immediately greeted by harsh cries on the part of the young birds there. Pointing my finger closely at one of these youngsters, a downy chick of some weeks' growth, with a growing bill and a pouch already showing beneath it, I was somewhat surprised to be greeted with a peace offering of a six-inch menhaden which the bird produced from some unfathomed depth of his anatomy, held for a lingering moment lothly in his beak and then laid at my feet. Probably he thought me an overgrown youngster of ravening tendencies and he preferred to give his fish rather than himself.

At nightfall soft winds from the sea blow the crimson sunset up over the little island and hang it in gorgeous tapestry all along a pearl-blue, western sky. Through this gorgeous glow the last pelicans sail silently home. The hoarse cries of the feeding young sound through the rapidly growing dusk, the old birds bathe in the river still crimson with reflections of the passing sunset glory, and then silence broods over the brooding thousands. The young are warm and snug between the mother bird and the nest, and the old birds sleep with head tucked under wing.

