

THE GREAT WHITE PELICAN (*Peleconus onothotations*)

By Nancy McLean

One of seven species, the Great White Pelican (*Peleconus onothotations*) is a large powerful bird with a 250 cm wingspan (5 ft) and is 160 cm in length, weighing 9 kg. Amazingly it can fly up to a distance of 300 miles nonstop often in spectacular formation. Not only graceful in air, it is adapted to water. However, it is clumsy on land.

The Great White Pelicans habitats are in lakes, swamps, and marshes in Southeastern Europe, Asian and Africa. It is thought 80% of the estimated world population of 90,000 pairs are in Africa. Threats to existence of this land include pollution, human existence and loss of habitat breeding sites. Predators include jackals, lions, eagles and crocodiles.

The Great White Pelican has a distinctive appearance. It is pure white with pink legs and pink fur around its eyes. It has a huge yellow and blue beak with a pouch, underneath which acts as a scoop allowing it to catch fish. The takeoff from water surfaces is assisted by its webbed feet and strong short legs. A great deal of their time is spent in freshwater lakes and little islands which are used as safe places to rest.

The Great Pelican sometimes work as a team when fishing. Eight to ten birds swim surrounding the fish and together plunge in the water and scoop up water with fish swimming it. The pelican then lift its head, and squeezes the pouch to get rid of water, leaving the fish behind in its mouth to swallow.

Pelicans vary in size. The females are smaller than males and have smaller beaks. At the end of the beak there is a little hook used for combing the feathers. This keeps them conditioned for flying. Special oils waterproof the feathers which assist in flying.

Often the pelicans breed in colonies. Both parents make a nest of sticks in the grass or on trees, where they lay 2 to 4 eggs. Together they look after the young birds.

These pelicans migrate in spring and fall. In the fall, the Great White Pelican migrates from Europe to Africa and in the spring returns to their breeding grounds in Europe. About 70,000 fly south from the Danube Delta and Caspian Sea to winter in the Sudan. They make a stopover in Israel's Jordan River Valley, where they feed on carp, mallet and blue lapins raised by fish farmers.

The pelicans can consume a metric ton of fish in a couple of days, which explain why they are a problem for fish farmers. Frustrated farmers have been known to shoot at them, while others try to scare them away by making loud noises. However, sometimes as many 200 pelicans remain in Israel.

Researchers are gleaning information by satellite tracking routes. They attached transmitters on a few White Pelicans to gather information about their migration. Their

studies include finding alternative feeding resources for the pelicans during their migration and finding ways to prevent them from damaging fish ponds.

The Great White Pelican is a “threatened” species.