

BREEDING OF THE AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN ON THE TEXAS COAST

WITH THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

By J. J. CARROLL

It has been known to me for perhaps twenty years, certainly long before I saw anything of it in print, that the American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) occasionally bred on the Gulf coast of Texas. It was not until the spring of 1927, however, that I found it convenient to make any personal observation of these birds at their nesting grounds.

Since the resumption of my ornithological studies in 1926, I have made annual visits to the well known Bird Island, lying in Laguna Madre, some thirty or thirty-five miles below the town of Corpus Christi. June 17 of that year was spent there and no White Pelicans were seen among the thousands of other sea-birds then nesting. My visit was made earlier the following year, May 14, 1927, and as we neared the island I was no little excited to see seventy-five or one hundred huge white birds, flying high over the island, circling gracefully in the well known White Pelican fashion. The boatman's inclination was to discourage me, explaining that he often saw numbers of the birds there in spring and summer, but that they were non-breeders. But this time he was wrong. In the cactus near the center of the island we found five nests, each containing one egg, and a large number



Fig. 70. A BREEDING COLONY OF AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS ON THE GULF COAST OF TEXAS.

of other nests apparently ready for eggs. The nests were merely small mounds of shell and sand, depressed in the center, with very little lining. The birds were extremely shy, finally settling on the water at a distance of perhaps one hundred and fifty yards from the shore-line, where they swam along in perfect order. Truly a magnificent picture they made.

My pilgrimage to the island the next year (1928) was made on exactly the same day of the same month as in the preceding year, May 14. The birds were then present in increased numbers. Certainly there were no less than one hundred

and fifty nests and I am inclined to think there were nearer two hundred, dispersed over a considerable area among the prickly pear cactus. The birds were grouped along the shore-line and took flight at our approach, settling on the water in close formation as before. Not one bird was found near the nests and we discovered that the entire rookery had been abandoned. Eggs were lying around everywhere, in and out of nests. They were all perfectly cold. I examined a few and found that they contained embryos perhaps one week old. I have never been able to reach any conclusion as to why the nests were deserted. The boatman had been on the island a few days before and the birds were at the nests. Two nights prior to our coming, that vicinity had been visited by a considerable wind and rain storm. I would think this might account for it except that the hundreds of Brown Pelicans were at their nests as usual, as were the thousands of gulls and terns. The nests



Fig. 71. NESTS AND EGGS OF AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN ON THE GULF COAST OF TEXAS.

contained from one to three eggs, very few of the latter number. Some of the nests were well constructed—a mound of sand and shell ten or twelve inches high, hollowed on top, with only a small percentage of vegetable matter entering into the composition.

My trip in 1929 was made on June 9. There were only fifteen or twenty nests, all containing young of varying size, the first young White Pelicans I had ever seen. They were inclined to gravitate into groups when the old birds left them, after the fashion of young Brown Pelicans. The nests were situated in the outer edge of a large colony of Brown Pelicans. The birds were not nearly so shy as they had been on former occasions. The old nesting site had been abandoned.

This island, I should add, is usually referred to as Bird Island or Big Bird Island. The proper name for it according to the U. S. Geodetic Survey chart is South Bird Island. The "south" is to differentiate it from a smaller island four or five miles north in Laguna Madre designated on the chart as North Bird Island. It is commonly called Little Bird Island. In former years a good many

sea birds bred there; but the tide had fallen unusually low one summer and marauding coyotes from nearby Padre Island had waded and swam over and wrought havoc among the young birds. Apparently this calamity had been forgotten by the spring of 1929, however, for there I found several nesting colonies including what I believe to be the greatest assemblage of breeding White Pelicans ever seen on the Texas coast. There were several hundred nests in all, distributed in three central nesting areas and several small outlying groups. Nearly all of the nests contained one or two eggs. Many were apparently fresh, although no careful examination was made of the eggs. A few nests contained newly hatched chicks—naked, helpless and disgustingly ugly. As the boat neared the island the birds seemed reluctant to fly; as a matter of fact they were much less timid than I had ever seen them before. Some fairly good pictures were made without the aid of a blind. One rarely sees a more imposing ornithological spectacle than a large company of these huge birds going through their maneuvers. Flushed from

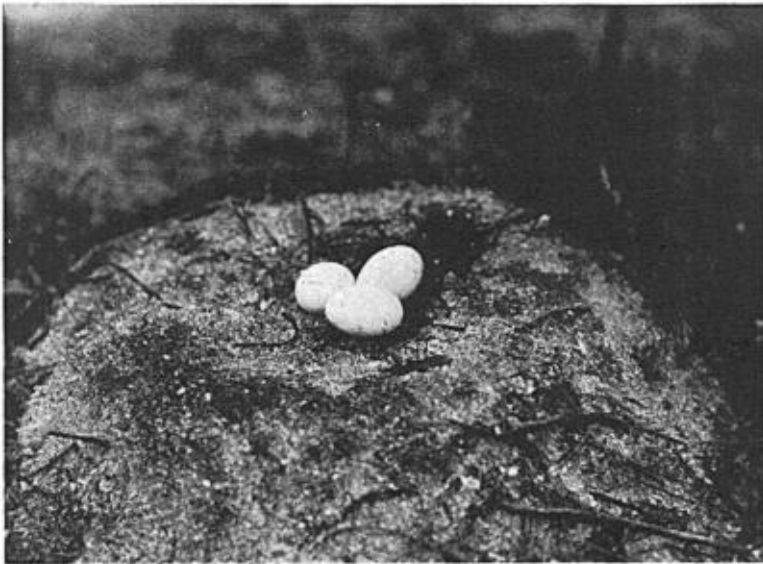


Fig. 72. AN UNUSUALLY HIGH NEST MOUND OF AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN IN A COLONY ON THE GULF COAST OF TEXAS.

their nests at the south end of the island, they proceeded northward for some distance, then wheeled in perfect order, barring a few stragglers, and swept by us, the sound of their powerful pinions beating against the wind rivaling that made by a mild gale. They settled on the water at the south end of the island, but as soon as we moved northward to make observations in that direction they quickly returned to their nests.

It is an interesting thing to find nesting birds so far removed from their usual breeding grounds and, moreover, to find them there consistently year after year. This instance is not unlike that of the northward movement of the Fulvous Tree Duck in Texas, having nearly forsaken their old haunts in the Rio Grande Valley and breeding regularly now not a great distance west of Houston, where fifteen or twenty years ago they were practically unknown.

Houston, Texas, March 15, 1930.