

American White Pelicans Splash Down in Corte Madera

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A birding opportunity exists to see huge American white pelicans up close on the east side of Redwood Highway at Corte Madera Shorebird Marsh. Assemblages of up to three dozen pelicans congregate on the artificial islands in the lagoon and forage in the water there and at the nearby South Outfall Canal. Parking is at a pullout between Trader Joe's and Nordstrom. Shorebird Marsh is part of the once more extensive marsh complex at the mouth of Corte Madera Creek.

American white pelicans are often seen feeding and roosting together in Marin between July and January, their nonbreeding season. Large numbers of nonbreeding pelicans also frequent California's Central Valley. Migrating away from the San Francisco Bay Area, starting in late January, they are on their breeding grounds from February through May and part of June. The greatest numbers breed on brackish and sometimes freshwater lakes in the Great Basin and elsewhere in the interior of North America, where they nest in dense colonies in remote locations, free from human disturbance. Although monogamous, pair bonds are established upon arrival at the nesting colony, suggesting a repairing each year. Nest site tenacity—returning to the same nest location each year—is rare or absent.

These pelicans often feed cooperatively, swimming together in a coordinated, almost ballet-like fashion, to corral schooling fish towards the shallows, where they scoop them up in their large pouches before swallowing the catch. They are also known to steal fish from other birds, especially gulls and cormorants. This is known as kleptoparasitism.

Don't just look on the water for white pelicans, but scan the skies too. You may see a magnificent squadron of these immense birds floating on high. They soar with a graceful steadiness on broad white and black wings. These pelicans move to and from roosting and feeding areas such as the marshes along Highway 37. Large heads and huge beaks make these pelicans look almost prehistoric, and they are one of North America's largest bird species. They have the second largest wingspan of any bird in North America, after the California condor. Wingspan averages 95–120 inches and body weight ranges from 11 to 20 pounds. They are among the heaviest flying birds in the world. Males are generally larger than the females but otherwise the sexes look alike.



Flocks of white pelicans visiting Shorebird Marsh and Corte Madera Creek have brought much-needed delight in these anxious times. Photo by Ann Thomas

The American white pelican is listed as a California Species of Concern, which means a species at risk in California. They used to breed more widely in the state, but decades of declining numbers have left them breeding regularly in California only in the Klamath Basin and at Clear Lake. The main cause of decline is loss of habitat, often from water diversions and land reclamation for agriculture. Outside California, however, the species is common enough to qualify as a Species of Least Concern, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The full name for our species includes “American” to distinguish it from the great white pelican, which breeds in southeastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Old World pelican is enormous, with a wingspan reaching close to 12 feet. Our white pelican also differs from our other local pelican, the brown pelican, most obviously in its color. The American white pelican is also bigger. Like its larger relative, the brown pelican leaves the Bay Area for the breeding season, becoming scarcer around mid-February to mid-April. However, some nonbreeding birds linger in Marin all year. The breeding birds nest on the Channel Islands in Southern California.

While the American white pelican forages from the surface of the water, dipping its beak down into the water to scoop up prey to swallow, the brown pelican is a plunge diver. It patrols as high as 60 feet above the water, then plunges into the water. Its throat pouch expands to trap fish, filling with as much as two gallons of water. It then surfaces with its beak held close to its body, allowing water to drain out of the pouch, and swallows the prey with a toss of its head.

*A wonderful bird is the pelican.
His beak can hold more than his belly can.
He can hold in his beak
Enough food for a week!
But I'll be darned if I know how the hellican!*
— Dixon Lanier Merritt

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