Endangered list may lose La. pelicans

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NEW ORLEANS — Forty years after DDT almost wiped out brown pelicans in the Pelican State, they have soared back to the point that the state bird may soon be removed from the endangered list in Louisiana.

In the spring, more than 16,000 pairs are expected to nest on Louisiana's barrier islands, where 1,276 fledglings imported from Florida replaced the flocks that crowded the coast in the first half of the century.

"It's really pretty neat, the way they've done so well," said Tom Hess, the biologist in charge of Louisiana's nesting census for the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Last year, he said, 16,405 nesting pairs produced 34,641 young, compared to 13,766 pairs and 22,650 fledglings in 2000.

Federal wildlife officials say they are drafting a proposal to take the birds off the endangered list in Louisiana and Texas, where 2,400 pairs nested last year.

Edith Erslng of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service office in Clear Lake, Texas, cautioned, however, that similar proposals have been made before but have been pushed aside by more urgent concerns.

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times as much as their stomachs can take

In the air, their huge beaks, wide-
spread wings and short tails give
them a ponderably-like silhouette.
They're gorgeously graceful, with
wings beating almost in unison as
they skim waves or fly up to 60 feet
over the water to scouat for schools
of fish. When they spot fish, they
tuck in their wings and plummet
bill-first into the water, the impact
on their bodies cushioned by air
sacs under the skin.

They nest on barrier islands,
which are free of mammals and
snakes that might eat their eggs
among.

Like many other birds, pelicans
were almost wiped out by the
pesticide DDT, which caused them
to lay eggs with shells too thin to
protect developing embryos.

By the middle of the 20th century,
the only sustainable populations
were in Florida, where the first
national wildlife refuge was created
in 1903 on Pelican Island.

A brown pelican flies over West Galveston Bay, near Galveston, Texas, in 1997.

From 1984 to 1986, fledglings
descended from these birds were
taken from Queen Bess Island, one of
the first colonies, to Last Island, the
most western island in the Isles
Derniers.

Twenty years ago, they were a
rare sight. From 1959 until 1980, the
National Audubon Society's annual
Christmas bird count did not tally a
single pelican in Louisiana, said
Andrew Farnsworth, the biologist
who analyzes those counts for the
National Audubon Society.

"It's possible the species was in
Louisiana in some numbers during
that period. The species just wasn't
reported on the Christmas bird
count," he said.

Now you can see one or more
almost any time you cross the Lake
Pontchartrain Causeway or take a
ferry across the Mississippi River.
Scores crowd breakwaters on Lake
Pontchartrain's north shore.

Pelicans banded in Louisiana
have turned up in every state along
the Gulf Coast, and even one each in
Cuba, the Yucatan, Belize and
Guatemala, said James Harris,
chief biologist for the U.S. Fish and
Wildlife Service's seven refuges
in southeastern Louisiana.

In 1998, Hurricane Georges
ripped up Louisiana's barrier is-
lands. The nest count in 1999
dropped by almost half, then re-
bounded in the last two years.

"It's not because the birds were
killed; it's just because they're very
traditional - they like to go back to
the same place year after year,"
Harris said. "Their traditional nest-
ing places had been pretty much de-

On the Internet:
Louisiana Department of Wildlife
and Fisheries, for refuge division:
http://www.wlf.state.la.us/apps/ref-
gard/page/73p7.asp
National Audubon Society:
http://www.audubon.org

Nest sighting hours:
http://www.nws-gw-
camps.gov/la/birds.html