After a lengthy disappearance, La. pelicans make a comeback

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In the early 1960s the brown pelican disappeared from Louisiana’s coastal regions, but biologists believe the official state bird is again on the road to recovery after 15 years of battling adverse weather and pesticide pollution.

The struggle to re-establish the brown pelican in the state has not been easy, but Larry McNease, a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist at the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge in Cameron Parish, said the efforts by biologists apparently have paid off.

"I think the work’s been worth it, especially since it’s the state bird," McNease said. "And I think the people in the state appreciate it, too. It appears they’re on the road to recovering."

McNease said there are about 2,500 pelicans around nesting colonies at Queen Bess Island in Barataria Bay and at North Island in the Chandeleur Islands off the coast southeast of New Orleans.

The figure includes pelicans that were shipped from Florida to restock the nesting areas, as well as offspring from the relocated birds, he said.

Although the brown pelicans appear to be colonizing and reproducing once again in Louisiana, McNease cautioned that the population is far from being considered stable.

"It’s not so much a numbers game," McNease said. "Our plans are to have flocks of brown pelicans in different breeding areas. Any time you have all your eggs in two baskets, so to speak, anything could happen.

"Our long-range objective is to let the birds, on their own, move out from Queen Bess and North Island and establish their own nesting colonies. That would be ideal, and could happen in time."

At one time, the brown pelican population was said to be greater than 85,000, and it was commonplace to sight the sea bird dive-bombing.
its prey in coastal waters.

The odd-looking birds, with their webbed feet, majestic wings and long, pouched bills were so loved that they were named the state bird in 1902. The state's official seal includes a mother brown pelican and her young.

The pelican was lovingly referred to by Cajuns as "grand gosier," meaning "big gullet."

But by the late 1950s the once-abundant pelicans were beginning to disappear in Louisiana.

The last nesting colony was observed on North Island in 1961, and no trace of the birds could be found in later years, according to the recently published book, "The Return of the Brown Pelican," by Joseph E. Brown and Dan Guravich.

Alarmed by the disappearance, state biologists and wildlife officials began investigating.

After in-depth studies, biologists concluded that prolonged freezing temperatures, hurricanes, severe storms and flooding, disease and chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides, particularly Endrin and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), contributed to the demise of brown pelicans in Louisiana.

Stricter regulations were placed on the use and disposal of chemicals, including agricultural pesticides, and in recent years they are less of a threat to pelicans and other wildlife, according to McNease. The pesticides and other chemicals not only poisoned the birds, but also contaminated or destroyed the fish which serve as a food supply for pelicans, he said.

Efforts to re-establish the brown pelican officially began in 1968. The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission and Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission worked together to begin a pelican restocking program in Louisiana.

According to a report compiled by McNease, Ted Joenan, a state wildlife biologist at the Rockefeller refuge, and Stephen A. Nesbitt and Lovett E. Williams Jr., biologists with the Florida wildlife commission, the objectives of the restocking program were to re-establish the brown pelican in Louisiana, to monitor any remaining evidence linked to the fortunes of the Louisiana pelicans in the late 1950s and early '60s, and to compare pesticide residue levels in the Florida pelicans that were transferred to Louisiana.

In 1968 and 1969 some 100 nestlings were transplanted from Florida to Louisiana, according to the report, and placed at nesting colonies at the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge and at Grand Terre Island near Queen Bess Island. Following a die-off of birds at the Rockefeller Refuge, attributed to probable pesticide pollution, subsequent releases were made at Grand Terre, the report said.

Queen Bess Island, a small, isolated, shell island, later was made a nesting colony, and Grand Terre currently is used by pelicans for "feeding and resting," McNease said. North Island was re-established as a nesting colony, he said.

The first reproduction occurred in 1971, and the pelican population began increasing, McNease said.

In 1975, however, some 40 percent of the estimated 450 brown pelicans at the nesting colonies died off, according to the biologist. Once again the presence of Endrin was detected, and the chemical was named as the cause of the die-off, McNease said.

More than 700 pelicans have been transplanted from Florida to Louisiana since 1968, and McNease said state biologists hope the recent years of successful reproduction are indicators that the restocking has been a success.

Though brown pelicans are again increasing in Louisiana, McNease said, they probably will remain on the endangered species list "for a little while longer." If the pelicans are removed from the list, which protects them under federal laws, "they would still be a protected bird under state laws, and state laws are strong," he said.

Biologists continue to be concerned with the threat to pelicans from pesticides and chemical pollutants, "but that aspect is looking better," according to McNease.

Unlike other states, such as California, where humans are a direct threat to the safety of brown pelicans, Louisiana seldom encounters instances of intentional killing or maiming of the birds, McNease said.

"Our birds are pretty well isolated here," he said. "Our biggest problem where people are concerned is with fishermen who unknowingly fish too close to a nesting colony and disturb the birds."

A major, uncontrollable threat to the birds is the weather, McNease said. Freezing temperatures can affect nesting habits and kill vulnerable hatchlings, he said, and storms, floods and winds can destroy nests and young pelicans.

"Being a wild bird, the pelican is exposed to so much," McNease said. "But if they're given a chance, the birds can take care of themselves. They learn to adapt if they're given the opportunity."

Although the demise of the pelicans in the 1960s was disastrous and unfortunate, perhaps the "grand gosier's" plight served as a warning to Louisiana, McNease said. "Maybe the pelicans were warning us that something was wrong and needed to be corrected," McNease said.