

## Too Much of a Good Thing?

By Martin Hagne

Some time ago the Brown Pelican was a rare sight along the Texas Coast. That's not the case today. You can visit just about any bay or beach and see dozens of Brown Pelicans in majestic flight low over the water, or diving into the sea head first looking for fish!



Brown Pelican in flight. Photo by Mike Williams

In 1973 they were put on the Endangered Species Act list, and very few existed then. That's way down from the old records of 5,000 back at the turn of the 20th century. Shortly after 1900, the species started to decline due to being hunted by fishermen who said that the birds competed too much with their fisheries. Pelicans were wholesale slaughtered.

When DDT and a few other agricultural chemicals were introduced, the population plummeted further. DDT softened their egg shells and incubating parents would crush the eggs. By the mid 60's there were only 50 or so Brown Pelicans left.

Once the species was protected, and the use of those certain chemicals was curbed, the pelicans slowly started to bounce back. From only 50 birds left in the early 70's to today's 20,000 count, they even have surpassed their early 1900's numbers twice and then some! When endangered species protection is done right it will work!

We really don't know just how many Brown Pelicans existed in the wild along Texas coasts many years before the early 1900's. It could have been more, but we only started to keep track then. And we also don't quite know how many nesting colonies there were way back then, and that makes a difference.

Today some biologists, including our staff here at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, are finding that some Brown Pelicans are crowding out other birds nesting along our shore, and especially on bay reefs and islands. They aren't necessarily doing this on purpose, but there are more pelicans than nesting grounds it seems, at least in some areas. This can potentially develop into a huge issue for other shore birds and water type birds.

So why was this not an issue historically, before they started to disappear? For one, there are probably more now than then. And it is believed that back then they nested in a few mega

colonies and therefore did not disturb other species. Today those nesting grounds are no longer around and they have been spreading out.

What is yet to come is not known for sure. Do we have to control a species we brought back from near extinction? Do we need to replace nesting habitats lost? Will they self-regulate? One thing is for sure... everything in nature is tied to something else, and we humans don't often understand it enough to get it right.

Enjoy and renew in nature during this trying time of Covid-19 (at a safe 6' apart distance of course.) Be safe!