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Mysteries of the Madison

Pelicans: What are they and why are they here?

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"All I can tell you is that I think it's so exciting because I used to spend time in Florida and would see pelicans off the dock and here they are, just off the Madison River and I just love the idea that it's the same species!" said Rachel Van Wingen.

Van Wingen is an officer on the Montana Audubon Board of Directors, and while she says she is no bird expert, the winged animals are close to her heart. But what are the pelican-looking birds that appear on Southwest Montana waterbodies? And what are they doing on the Madison River?

"White pelicans are interior birds," said Janet Ellis, senior director of policy with Montana Audubon. "I remember seeing them in the Grand Tetons in the 70s!"

According to Ellis, there are four colonies in Montana where the birds breed, the closest to Madison County being just north on Canyon Ferry.

"They usually nest on land, usually on islands in the water as they can't walk very far," said Ellis. "They eat fish and other aquatic life, like frogs and insects, and usually can fly far distances."

The lifespan of the bird is anywhere between eight and 25 years, and they usually stay in their family groups or pairings. They have one of the largest wingspans among North American birds, second only to the California condor. They begin courtship or nesting around April and early May, shortly after arriving at their island nesting sites, according to www.montanaoutdoors.com.

Jim Hansen is the central flyaway migratory bird coordinator with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and said it is possible to confuse white pelicans with brown pelicans – the seafaring type.

"It's possible to see both birds in wintering areas along the coast but white pelicans are inland species," Hansen said.

Hansen also said the birds do not usually begin nesting until they are 3 years or older.

"It's just the nature of the bird," he said. "I suspect the ones around the Madison Valley are sub-adults, they might be 1 or 2 years old."

The "teenage pelicans," as Hansen called them, are

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not yet nesting – he said a bump on the nose is a good indicator of an adult pelican or failed nester, meaning they are adult pelicans who have failed at producing a nest.

“Adults pelicans that are breeding have a bump,” added

Amy Seaman, conservation program manager and lobbyist for Montana Audubon. “Juvenile pelicans will have gray on the top of their head and that helps a little more in the identification process.”

Hansen said coyotes and raccoons might threaten young pelicans, but as far

as predators are concerned, adult pelicans are pretty safe. They can, however, be affected by different diseases such as West Nile and botulism, to which Seaman agreed.

“There are not really any predators to pelicans,” she said, adding data has shown an increasing population of

the species since 2009.

“It’s a pretty good testimonial to the good habitat around the Madison River if you’re seeing them there,” said Hansen. “That’s a pretty good sign that the area is in good shape and is a good place for various wildlife habitat.”



PHOTO COURTESY AMY SEAMAN
Pelicans on the Madison River.