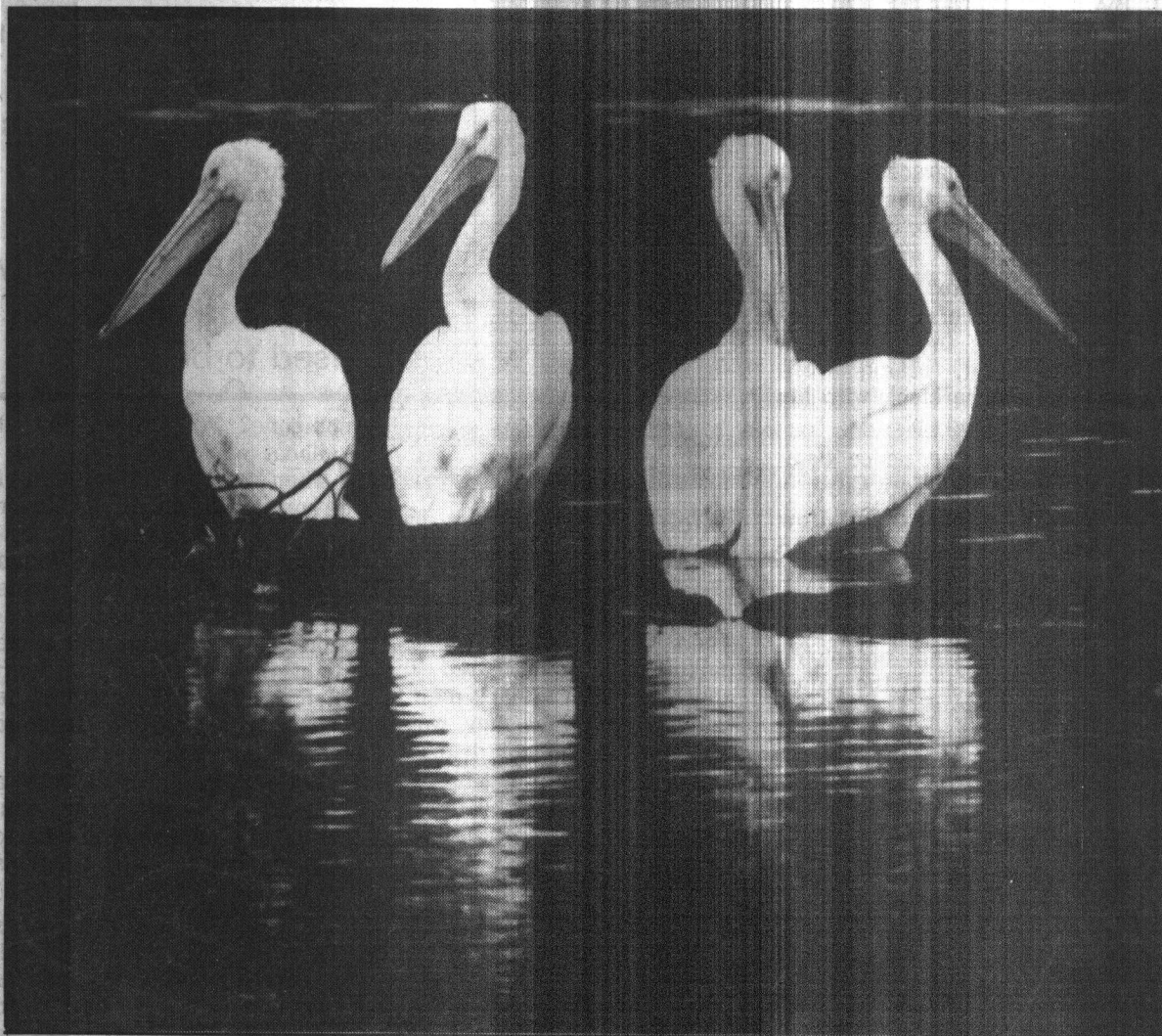


# Here for the winter



White pelicans survey their Pinto Lake surroundings.

Kurt Ellison

## White Pelicans flocking to Pinto and Kelly lakes

By MAYA SURYARAMAN  
STAFF WRITER

Flocks of white pelicans, rare in these parts, are wintering in Santa Cruz County's small freshwater lakes this year.

Around Watsonville, floating colonies of the large, beautiful birds have been sighted at Kelly and Pinto Lakes.

"I woke up one morning and saw what looked like big puffs of detergent in the water," said Jacquie Eisenhart, whose house fronts privately-owned Kelly Lake. "But then I got out my binoculars and the puffs turned into pelicans."

While nobody knows for certain why the birds are in Santa Cruz County, the best guess is that they have been driven to seek new habitat by California's three-year drought.

Most white pelicans in the West winter on the Colorado River delta. But a band of about 200 has always preferred

Nacimiento and San Antonio reservoirs in southern Monterey County, said Bruce Elliott, a wildlife biologist with the state Fish and Game Department in Monterey.

This year, Elliott said, the drought has shrunk the water levels at those two reservoirs, and the fish which the pelicans used to feed on are no longer as abundant. He suspects this has forced the migrating birds to disperse, many of them to Santa Cruz County's smaller freshwater lakes and sloughs.

Only about 50 remain this winter at Nacimiento and San Antonio reservoirs, Elliott said. Last week, a group of 40 was reported at Pinto Lake, and another group of 25 at Kelly Lake.

"They're beautiful. They look just like white swans," said Everett Waltrip, caretaker of Kelly Lake for the Pajaro Valley Rod and Gun Club, who has seen them landing and taking off from the lake.

About 4 feet in length, the bird has a long, curvy neck and an all-white body, except for black wing-tips and a bright orange bill. Its 8-foot wingspan makes it the largest wild bird in California, now that the condor exists only in captivity, Elliott said.

The birds catch fish by forming flotillas which herd schools of fish into shallow water.

"Then the pelicans all rush forward," and scoop fish up with their large bills, Elliott said.

In addition to the 200 or so that normally visit the Nacimiento and San Antonio reservoirs, about 1,000 winter each year on the salt ponds of South San Francisco Bay, Elliott said.

Although the birds seem to come and go between various haunts, they should be in Santa Cruz County until early March, when they will return to their breeding grounds in Nevada's Great Basin Desert.