

Will The Brown Pelican Follow Grizzly Into Extinction?

By ARTHUR RIBBEL
Copley News Service
POINT LOBOS STATE RESERVE, Calif. — Will the California brown pelican follow the California grizzly bear into extinction?

Friends of the monarch of the diving birds in the Golden State fear so, and with disturbing reason. "Old Gramps," the solemn seabird with the great beak and the great pouch for storing his food, has waddled and winged his way into many hearts, and the sorrow over his present plight is not light.

James M. Fife, state park ranger of the Point Lobos State Reserve, six miles south of Monterey, on California's Central Coast, has compiled somber evidence that the California

brown pelican may be on his way out. His paper is based on competent sources, which he listed in a bibliography and on his own observations and experiences as a state ranger.

Fife and other authorities conclude that the big bird with the homely charm and majestic dive faces extinction because of the concentration of DDT which has seeped into his ocean fishing grounds.

More than two years ago, Dr. Robert W. Risebrough, a scientist with the University of California's Institute of Marine Resources, was quoted as saying the brown pelicans were laying eggs with shells so thin they cracked under the weight of the mother. The brown pelican has been here since

prehistoric days, and he has been an attraction taken much for granted by Californians and their visitors.

Fife, in his report, said the brown pelican has not bred on Bird Island at Point Lobos since 1961, when only one egg out of many laid was known to hatch and survive.

Fife's bibliography includes the Point Lobos Reserve records, an interview with Alan Baldrige, librarian at the Hopkins Marine Station, Pacific Grove; and Audubon Society magazines for September and July of 1969. From 1961 to 1965, the pelicans laboriously built their nests at Bird Island, but with no evidence of successful hatching.

At first, it was thought

humans, intruding upon the realm of the seabirds, and low-flying airplanes hampered the hatchery. In 1969, the first-recorded thin-shelled eggs began to appear or were first noticed on Anacapa Island, off Santa Barbara, Fife found.

"Each year since then the eggshells were found to be progressively thinner and more and more eggs were found crushed in the nests, apparently by the weight of the parent bird," said Fife. In the spring of 1970, only two eggs from about 600 nests inspected were sufficiently strong shelled to successfully hatch. In the spring of 1971, only eight eggs produced chicks out of 600 nests.

Citing his authorities, Fife said DDT is considered by

many marine biologists to be a major factor due to the high concentrations of that chemical found in broken shells and crushed embryos. He said an inhibiting enzyme (carbon anhydrase) tends to form in the body of the parent pelican causing a breakdown in the bird's ability to secrete a thick layer of calcium carbonate around the embryo. Without this natural protection, the unnaturally fragile shells are crushed rather than incubated, Fife reported.

Concurrent with this pathetic breeding failure, a curious and mysterious collapse in the parental responsibility of the pelicans has occurred, observed the ranger.

"In the past, the adult birds always jealously guarded their

young, fending off enemies and keeping the eggs covered and warm," said his report.

"Now it seems more common for the adults to wander away aimlessly, not caring if the eggs are incubated, or if predators raid their nests."

Risebrough reported that the insecticide DDT is dumped into the ocean after it is either washed off the plants by rain or carried through the air as a spray. Once in the sea, it is absorbed into plankton. Small fish, in turn, eat the plankton and are consumed by the pelicans. Fife said fish-eating birds store up concentrations in their fatty tissue, from where it is dispersed through their systems, and adversely affects the reproductive processes.

Some friends of the California brown pelican were heartened to observe many immature birds in the Monterey peninsula area last year. Some were led into the false assumption that the problem of the disappearing pelicans no longer existed. But Fife said last year was an exceptionally good breeding year for the pelicans in Mexico and the bumper crop migrated to Monterey, raising the optimism of some pelican lovers.

"If all these pelicans are surviving in Mexico, why can't they survive in California?"

"The answer becomes obvious," points out the ranger.

"As the pelicans migrate northward and then return, they are fishing in waters polluted by the very poison that decimated the California flocks."

"It may be already too late for the brown pelican," Fife wrote.

Will man once more write a shameful epitaph over another species of Mother Nature's creation?

Those who have thrilled to the spectacular dives of the wise old codger in the surf, who have laughed at his sometimes ludicrous antics in the sea and who have treasured him as a wildlife neighbor, apparently have a hard and heavy load of despair to carry this decade.

Anza-Borrego Park Lets You Touch Nature

PALM SPRINGS — The stream of visitors to the Southern California desert wonderland at Anza-Borrego State Park increases every day and includes many not bent on destroying the area with reckless operation of recreational vehicles.

These new visitors are people deeply and seriously interested in the history and the geological background of the area. They come in campers, in station wagons, in trailers and in ordinary cars. The interest has increased so much, in fact, that a Palm Springs organization called Desert Expeditions sponsors trips to the desert in four-wheel-drive vehicles, complete with a botanist-geologist-naturalist.

What these 1972 "explorers" see and experience had a geological origin millions of years ago. Known history, however, dates back to 1772 when a Spanish officer, Lt. Pedro Fagez, led a patrol of troops from the San Diego Presidio in search of army deserters. Riding out of a canyon portal, they beheld the awesome semibarbaric wilderness, subsequently named the Borrego Desert.

Two years later Capt. Juan Bautista de Anza led an expedition of 240 soldiers, a few colonists and 1,000 head of cattle from Mexico into California.

They continued on to San Francisco but as a legacy left the name—Anza-Borrego.

There have been subsequent efforts to explore and develop the desert but absence of roads has been a barrier to these efforts. And, the desert is big: 50 miles north to south and 45 miles from east to west. To many this desolation is scary; to increasing numbers, however, it is magnificent.

There are many spectacular things to see, and the traffic is increasing, particularly to places like:

—Font's Point, overlooking the Borrego Badlands. It is a series of barren, steep-sided ravines totally devoid of vegeta-

tion and sometimes called "a vision of hell."

—Yaqui Well, an infamous seep, has ghost legends born from a time grubstakers mined for gold.

—Split Mountain, a canyon of perpendicular walls rising a sheer 600 feet. Occasionally flash spring rains transform this gorge into a torrent capable of pushing brush and boulders, obliterating trails and rearranging creek beds before gradually seeping into the sandy wastes of open desert.

—Elephant trees, botanical phenomena exclusive to California, dominate the hillsides.

—Shell Reef, a seemingly barren ridge high in the Anza-Borrego strata. It can be seen only after a five-hour ride over forbidding terrain. Its name derives from the millions of prehistoric oyster shells encrusted or outlined in the ridge.

There are other delights here, too, including fossil beds, remains of an ancient sea and many (700 miles) desert trails.

This new surge of serious interest in Anza-Borrego is a source of satisfaction to those who feared the reckless use of recreational vehicles would destroy this monument to ancient geological life.



THE GOOD LIFE Three-Race Series
Scheduled May 14