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Quick facts

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Class: [Aves \(Birds\)](#)

Order: Pelecaniformes

Family: Pelecanidae

Genus: *Pelecanus*

Species: 7

Body length: 4 to 6 feet (1.2 to 1.8 meters), depending on species

Wingspan: 6 to 11 feet (1.8 to 3.4 meters), depending on species

Weight: 10 to 17 pounds (4.5 to 7.7 kilograms), depending on species, although there is one documented case of a 30-pound (13-kilogram) pelican!

Life span: up to 30 years

Incubation: 28 to 36 days, depending on species

Number of eggs laid: 1 to 3

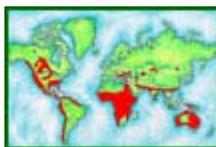
Age of fledge: 60 to 76 days after hatching

Conservation

status: **Dalmatian pelican** *Pelecanus crispus* and **spot-billed pelican** *Pelecanus philippensis* are **vulnerable**.



Birds: Pelican



Range: every continent except for Antarctica.

Habitat: temperate and tropical shores; certain species are typically found along [seacoasts](#), and other species live near inland [lakes](#).

Kangaroos aren't the only ones with pouches

It is easy to identify pelicans because they are one of the only birds with a pouch under their bill. There is a famous limerick that begins, "A wonderful bird is the pelican, his bill will hold more than his belican...." This enormous, naked skin pouch hangs from the lower half of the pelican's long, straight bill, which is hooked at the tip. The pouch is used to catch fish and, as the limerick says, its bill does indeed hold more than its "belly can"! The unique pouch is also helpful in warm weather. While [roosting](#) in the hot sun, pelicans will open their bills and flap the pouch to cool off.

At home on the water or in the sky

Along with the giant pouch, the pelican is short-legged with a big body, and it appears rather clumsy on land. However, once in the water they are strong swimmers and use their [webbed feet](#) to push through the water. Pelicans and their relatives, such as cormorants, gannets, and boobies, are the only birds with a totipalmate foot. This means that webbing connects all four of their toes, even the back toe. They are also splendid fliers and can soar like eagles with their giant wings. Getting up in the air, however, can be challenging without the help of the wind. Pelicans must run over the water, beat their big wings, and pound the surface of the water with both feet in unison to get enough speed for takeoff.



Fun facts

- The Wild Animal Park is the only facility in North America that raises **great white pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, **pink-backed pelicans** *Pelecanus rufescens*, and **Dalmatian pelicans**.
- Pelicans are an old family of birds, with fossils dating back almost 40 million years!
- Gulls often sit on pelicans' heads, trying to steal a meal when the pelicans open their bills slightly to empty out the water.
- The lower half of a pelican's bill can hold up to 3 gallons (11 liters) of water, which is 2 to 3 times more than can be held in its stomach!
- A group of pelicans is called a pod.

See them

Wild Animal Park: Great white pelicans, pink-backed pelicans, and Dalmatian pelicans live in the **Africa Field Exhibit**; pink-backed pelicans can also be seen in **Nairobi Village**.



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pelican has been seen flying with cormorants. The cormorants dive deep in the water, which brings the fish to the surface for the pelican to scoop up!

One can often see pelicans flying in **flocks**, as they are extremely **social** birds. They may fly in a "V" formation, but usually fly in a single line. Pelicans live in flocks with the young and adults of both sexes grouping together throughout much of the year. They nest in colonies in trees, bushes, or on the ground.

Feathered fishermen

Pelicans are considered waterbirds and use fish as their main food source. If, however, a small **reptile** or **amphibian** comes their way, they will eat that, too! Pelicans use their bill pouch like a fishing net to scoop the fish into their bill. They then tip their head forward to drain out the water. However, they do not carry fish very far in their bill but swallow them soon after catching one.

Methods of fishing differ among the different pelican species:

Brown pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis* —a plunge diver that fishes over salt water. The brown pelican can sight a fish when flying at heights up to 70 feet (21 meters) and then will dive headfirst into the water. The bird may **submerge** completely with a great splash or only partially, depending on the height of the dive. Air sacs under their skin cushion the impact of hitting the water, and the sacs also help them bob back to the surface like feathered corks. Brown pelicans seem to be the only species that uses this method of fishing.

American white pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* —a group fisher. Four to five American white pelicans will swim side by side, gliding quietly in a semicircle facing the shore. Then, with much wing flapping and water splashing, they will drive fish ahead of them toward the shore. Once the fish are in shallow water, it is easy for the pelicans to scoop them up in their bills!

Pink-backed pelican *Pelecanus rufescens* and **spot-billed pelican** *Pelecanus philippensis* —quick grabbers. These pelicans paddle along in the water, usually where there is a lot of vegetation where they can hide. They slowly swim up to **prey** and then catch it with a quick lunge. These birds like to hunt by themselves.

Dalmatian pelican *Pelecanus crispus* —let others find the fish! In the Prespa Lakes of Greece, the Dalmatian



It is a good thing pelicans are successful fishers because they are among the largest of all birds.



An adult pelican may eat up to 4 pounds (1.8 kilograms) of fish per day! Around the world, pelicans have been accused of competing with fishermen as well as with the commercial fishing industry. However, numerous studies have shown that pelicans usually eat “rough” fish, such as carp, shiners, mullet, and minnows, which are not favorites with people.

Parenting pelicans

Pelicans like to be around other pelicans and they don't mind being around other birds, either, be they cormorants or **flamingos**. They nest in large colonies, either near the water or in trees, depending on the **species** and **habitat**. During breeding season, both males and females use their pouches to carry nest-building materials: twigs, grass, and feathers. The parents take turns **incubating** the eggs. The eggs hatch a day apart, and the first chick to hatch often attacks its younger siblings so it gets the most food. The young are not fed from the pouch; instead, the parents will open their mouths wide to allow the young to reach down into the gullet to get the food.

A pelican brief

Even though these birds may be unusual looking, they have successfully **adapted** to their various habitats for millions of years. So far there are no **endangered species** of pelican, and we hope that with continuing conservation education this is how their status will remain.

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Like all pelicans, this pink-backed pelican's pouch can actually hold three times the amount of food its stomach can hold, but they rarely catch that much at one time.

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