

## Pelicans

Greetings from Thompson Manitoba.

I had always thought that the sport of synchronized swimming was a human creation: until my last visit to Winnipeg. We were about 150 kilometers north of Winnipeg on HWY 6, at a small community by the name of Fairford, where the highway crosses over a spill way for a hydro electric project. It is a great place to fish my husband informed me, as we pulled over to take a break from driving. We climbed out of our car stretching and walking out all our kinks, while we observed humans and birds fishing in the river.

The sky was filled birds hovering over, the water, and then diving in to emerge seconds later with a fish in their bills. There were gulls, cormorants, and other small water birds that I did not recognize, but I was most impressed by the White Pelicans. This was the first time that I had ever seen a live pelican. I have seen pictures of them in books and cartoons; even saw one in a movie on the TV, but never in real life. My impression of them had always been, that they were silly and awkward creatures, completely without grace. I was mistaken.

While my husband took pictures and chatted with folks fishing on the shore, I wandered along the water's edge watching pelicans glide in to join groups of their flock already bobbing about in the churning waters. Their size made them appear almost prehistoric when in flight. They would skim along, only inches from the surface of the river, before lightly setting down on the water. Once joining their friends they would dance and dive, most often several at a time, beneath the water and resurfacing as one. All together now: stoke stroke dive...and up! Time and time again they would dive, coming up more often than not with fish in their bills which they would swallow whole, or store in their pouches.

Fascinated, I approached the water, at a point where the birds were sitting very close to the shore line. With in moments about five birds left the group and swam towards me. They just sat in the water only a few feet from shore watching, but not coming any closer. I wondered if perhaps they were the security birds of the flock trying to tell me, "could you please step back from the water, miss. Thank you." So I stepped back a couple of paces, and as I did, the pelican welcoming committee did like wise. I think that was what you might have called a Mexican stand off.

Once I got back home, I looked these birds up in my Ontario bird book. (I have not bought a Manitoba bird book yet) Yep, they were pelicans. Their habitat in Ontario is large lakes or rivers, and the best place to spot them is Lake of The

Woods; Lake Nipigon; and occasionally along Great Lakes shorelines. In Manitoba, I imagine most any large body of water is a good place to spot these birds; there really is lots of water here! They eat small fish and amphibians, often working as a group, herding fish into large concentrations. In a single scoop a pelican can hold up to 12 liters of water and fish in it's pouch. As it lifts it's bill the water drains out, and the fish are left behind. They are considered endangered in Ontario because their breeding colonies are isolated from human activities, so they are very sensitive to disturbance. I'm not sure if that is true for the Manitoba pelicans, they seemed to be well socialized here.

I always say that you learn something new every day, and it sure was true for me that day. Pelicans really are an impressive creature, beautiful and graceful in motion. And like any large bird, I don't think it's a good idea to mess with them. My cousin who lives in Winnipeg, tells me that any where you see pelicans hanging around is a good place to fish. I will keep that in mind for sure.

Hope you are having a wonderful day,  
Gladys McElrea  
The Northern Gypsie  
GladysMcElrea.com