



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
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Brown Pelican

We have a most surprising visitor at the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC (WRA). This is a first for us and rather exciting. It (we're not too sure of gender) is a Brown Pelican.

Brown Pelicans are not common in BC. In fact I think I could safely use the word "rare" to describe this occurrence. At this time of year the pelican should be in central California or South America. However, they are strong flyers and will often wander quite a distance for food, especially after the breeding season. This one was pretty far from home and likely a victim of our inclement weather.



The immature pelican was picked up in White Rock by a member of the public after it appeared to hit a line. A number of kind folk braved the snow to get the bird to us. First it was taken to the Surrey SPCA; they then transferred it to the Burnaby SPCA, from where it was collected by one of our volunteers.

It appears to have frostbite, and is quite thin and dehydrated. It's first few days in care were spent rehydrating it, administering antibiotics (to prevent infection from developing in the affected tissues), and giving pain medication to help alleviate any discomfort. It is now being housed in a warm salt water pool to encourage it to drink. This also helps to keep the feet and legs clean helps with swelling and infection control. Brown Pelicans fish over salt water so this is a natural environment for it.

Our Pelican is having a great deal of difficulty thermoregulating. **Thermoregulation** is the ability of an organism to keep its body temperature within certain boundaries, even when the surrounding temperature is very different. As a result we have to carefully control the ambient temperature and take a temperature reading on the bird several times per day.

We are all holding thumbs for this rare BC visitor. Pelicans have been around for a long, long time. They are descendants of an ancient group of Cormorant-like birds that lived during the Cretaceous period, about 100 million years ago.

I personally have a special fondness for pelicans. I'm a bit wary of saying this out loud because it's a rather poor reason for an animal advocate to be attached to a particular critter. I'm not sure my colleagues at WRA will be too proud of me, so I shall have to whisper it: I like pelicans because of a children's book, Roald Dahl's *Giraffe and Pelly and me*.

Of course the book presents animals in a completely unrealistic fashion. The Pelican in this instance is a window cleaner. He is given this role because of his very large pouch of bare skin

suspended from his large bill. Giving human characteristics and qualities to animals is called **anthropomorphism**; Disney is very good at this. It's not very respectful, as it does not acknowledge the wonderful natural attributes that animals have in the wild.

For example: that amazing pouch. It can hold up to three gallons of water and fish at a single time. The pouch fills with water when the bird plunges for fish. They then drain the pouch through the corners of the mouth and swallow the fish. The Brown Pelican's throat pouch can hold up to three times as much as their stomachs. What an incredible adaptation.

They are master fishers. The Brown Pelican can sight a fish from 21 meters and then dive headfirst into the water. Quite often the bird will submerge completely with a great splash, sometimes only partially, depending on the height of the dive. They have air sacs under their skin, which cushion the impact of hitting the water, and help them to bob back to the surface like feathered corks. Brown Pelicans seem to be the only species that uses this method of fishing.

These huge birds have had a tough time of it. Their numbers were once decimated by agricultural pesticides and shooting for feathers. We are hoping this one will survive to contribute to the gene pool.

At this time of year we think of all the people who do not have a place to go over the holidays. Please also spare a thought for the critters who must spend this time with us.

If you would like to help out sick or injured wildlife over the holiday season, please consider making a donation to Wildlife Rescue or to your local rehabilitation centre.

Thank you for reading and learning about the animals in our care during 2006. Happy holidays.

Nicky Fried writes for the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC located at 5216 Glencarin Drive on Burnaby Lake. The Wildlife Rescue Association cares for injured, orphaned and pollution damaged wildlife. If you have an animal in distress call the WRA at 604.526.7275.