

AUSTRALIAN PELICANS

Images and text by Ian and Jill Brown
(The copyright for all images remains with the authors)

A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His bill will hold more than his belican.
He can take in his beak
Food enough for a week,
But I'm damned if I see how the helican.
(From 'The Pelican' - Dixon Lanier Merritt*)

Australian Pelicans (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) are one of the first birds we learn to identify as children. They are a common sight on rivers, lakes, beaches and jetties throughout Australia.



They are majestic when they paddle along, powered effortlessly by their enormous feet.

They roost on any suitable structure with a good view of the water.



The lights on bridges and boat ramps are always popular, and this power pole at Toorbul provided a good spot for some group feather care.



Boat masts are also popular roosts, with Pelicans if not boat owners!



They seem able to doze anywhere...



...though company is always nice, here on the Cairns waterfront including a few Egrets and a Royal Spoonbill.

Pelicans almost always manage to look well-groomed, and, as with all birds, feather care is very important, though it is complicated for a bird with large feet and an enormous bill.



Bathing is important.



Scratching the back of the neck is pretty difficult....



Preening can be a challenge, though that huge bill can be used with amazing delicacy.



...and may be best done in the water!

Bill care is also important to keep this giant scoop flexible.



Reaching the underside of a wing requires the flexibility of a contortionist!

A good stretch up, over and back seems to work for some.





Others prefer stretching the bill over a folded neck...



...and a little further...



...and finally right back!

This bill stretching is quite common, usually in conjunction with preening. It's quite quick, so watch closely next time you see a group of Pelicans loafing on the shore.



Pelicans hunt by swimming watchfully.



They suddenly lunge forward, extending their neck, when they see prey.



They raise their heads, straining the water out of their bills, but keeping the prey inside.



With a toss of their heads, they swallow their prey.

Pelicans not only rest communally, but also sometimes hunt communally.



This group in Cairns swam out from the Esplanade then formed a loose circle.



By lunging at the same time towards the middle of the circle, they effectively trapped any enclosed prey.

When Lake Eyre and other inland lakes fill after flooding rain in the north and west, Pelicans leave the coast and move inland to breed in vast colonies. During courtship, their bills change colour.



Occasionally, this brighter colouring is seen at the coast, presumably in birds about to leave for their breeding grounds. These were photographed at the Port of Brisbane Visitors' Centre lake.



After inland floods, Pelicans can be seen forming large flocks, and circling up in thermal currents to start their long journey west.



Those who fish should take great care to avoid leaving hooks, lines and other materials dangerous to Pelicans and other birds in and around our waterways, as these can become lodged in the bills they take such care to maintain.

Admire their charm, but avoid feeding them, as this can also cause damage, and encourage them to beg for food. They are at great risk, as some people will toss almost anything to them simply to watch them open their huge bills to catch it. Unfortunately, Pelicans often ingest things which can prove fatal because of this occasionally misplaced trust.



** Dixon Lanier Merritt (1879 – 1972) was a poet and humorist. He edited the "Tennessean", Nashville's morning paper. He was a founding member of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, and a nature center at the Tennessee Cedars of Lebanon State Park is named for him. So he knows his Pelicans!*