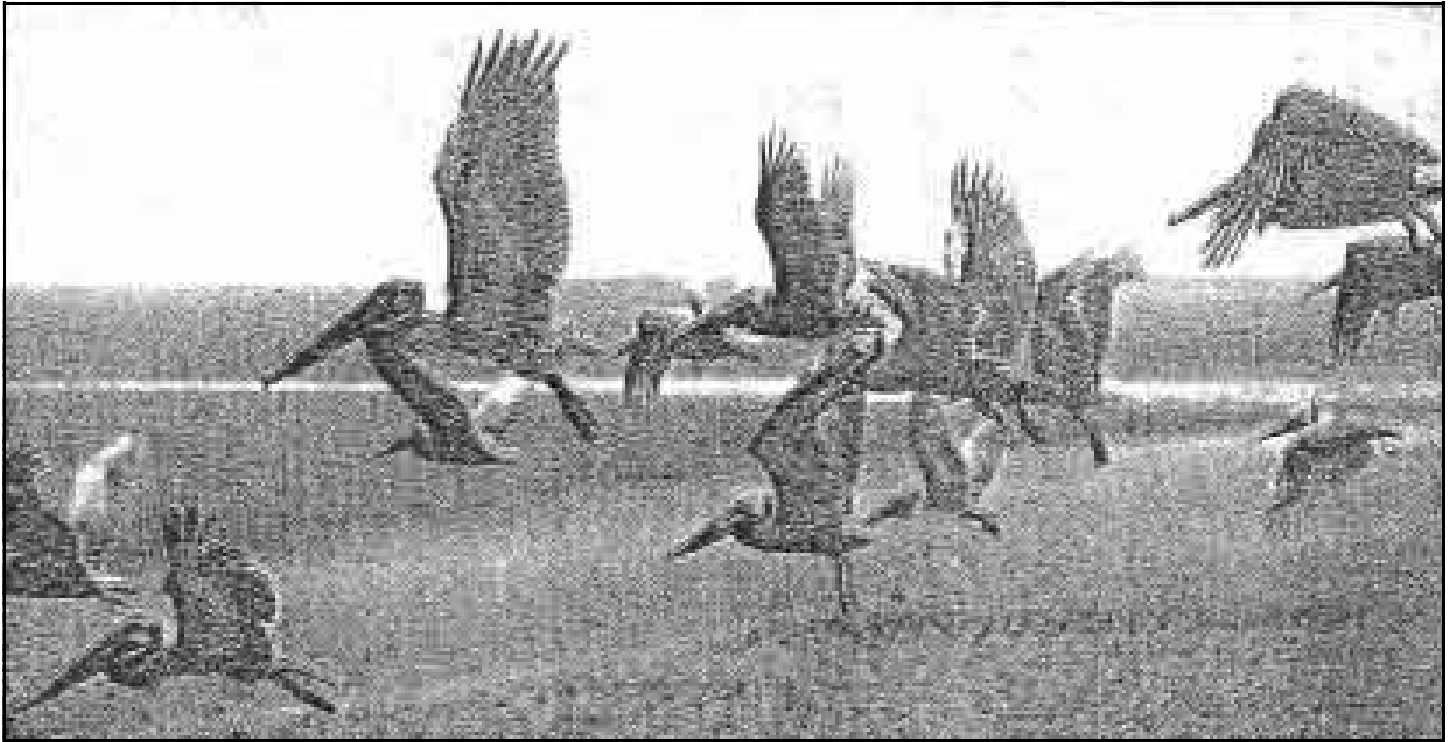


Return to Gaillard Island

In 1993, when the Register last visited Mobile Bay's Gaillard Island, about 1,500 pairs of pelicans nested on the wasteland. This year, as rooking season hits its peak, 6,000 pairs are raising young atop the dredge spoil. This stinkhole for humans continues to be a paradise for brown pelicans. Terns, stilts, herons and other birds also call the manmade island home.



BILL STARLING/Staff Photographer

A squadron of pelicans takes to the air above Gaillard Island, their wings beating in a slow but powerful rhythm. This year an estimated 12,000 pelicans will nest on the dredge spoil island.

By BEN RAINES
Staff Reporter

THE MIDDLE OF MOBILE BAY — In a nest of broken reeds and dried crabgrass, three blood-streaked pelican eggs sit, untended.

The sun beats down.
Birds wheel overhead.
The eggs sit.

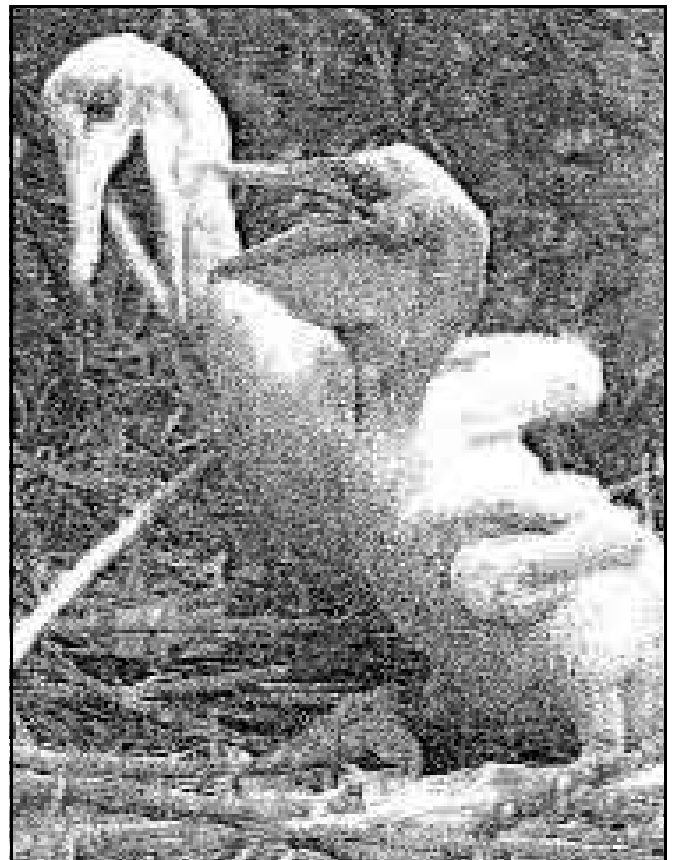
Then, one moves — just the slightest jiggle, as though something jostled the nest. Another minute, another jiggle. And then another and another, until, a crack.

And with that crack come many more until the shell is cleaved in two. Lying half inside the top of its broken shell is a hatchling, the color of a bruise and shining like a wet eggplant.

The exhausted thing is hideously ugly and disarmingly cute, something you could cradle in your hand — until the 1-minute-old pelican raises its popeyed head, creaks its miniature beak and hisses at you.

The bird has the perfect demeanor for coping with the awful, stinking place where it was just born.

Welcome to Gaillard Island, a manmade dump in the middle of Mobile Bay.



BILL STARLING/Staff Photographer

Month-old pelicans, looking like prehistoric chickens, wait at their Gaillard Island nest for more food.

Refuge has helped move pelicans off the endangered species list

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The island was created in the early 1980s, thanks to a Mobile dentist's brainstorm for dealing with a bunch of dirt that needed a place to live. The dentist, the late Wilson Gaillard came up with a homespun solution to the vexing problem that nearly derailed the aggressive drive to bring industry to South Alabama.

The problem centered on the proposed Theodore Ship Canal, which was about to be dug. The Army Corps of Engineers announced it would scoop up 30 million cubic yards of dredge spoil when it carved the canal. That's enough to cover the entire city of Mobile with a 3-inch layer of dirt. Nobody could figure out where to put so much dirt.

Enter Gaillard with his simple notion. Let's make an island, he suggested. Out in the Bay. Maybe the birds will like it.

By 1982, the canal was mostly finished and a 1,300-acre island shaped like a triangle had been created. By 1983, for the first time in the recorded history of Alabama, four pairs of brown pelicans nested in the middle of Mobile Bay.

The birds were on the endangered list back then, mounting a tenuous comeback from near extinction. A min culprit in their demise was the pesticide DDT. After working its way into the food chain, the pollutant messed up the pelicans' reproductive systems. The DDT-poisoned birds produced eggshells so thin that nesting birds crushed and killed their offspring when they sat down to incubate the eggs.

Pelicans managed to make it off the endangered list, thanks in no part to Gaillard Island. The number of birds nesting there rises dramatically every year. In 1992, some 2,600 pelicans were nesting on the island. By 1995, there were more than 6,000 birds. This year, according to wildlife biologists, it looks like more than 12,000 pelicans will call the island home.

Birds only, no humans allowed

Stepping out of a boat and onto the island, it's obvious Gaillard had a good idea. It's also obvious that the place belongs to the birds. Except for fish and wildlife officials, humans — even bird watchers — are not allowed on the island. Even without the protection of law, the swooping, diving, screaming birds make interlopers feel unwelcome.

They are everywhere, and not just the plus-size pelicans with their 8-foot wingspans. A couple thousand Royal terns nest there, with 500 or 600 Caspian terns thrown in the mix. A hodgepodge of other avian residents flap around the island too, including black-legged stilts, yellow-crowned night herons, cattle egrets, American Oyster Catchers, Sandwich terns, gull-billed terns, common terns and black skimmers.

This is the only spot in Alabama where colonial nesters (birds that like to nest in groups) do their thing. While the island is considered a minor rookery compared to the major breeding sites in the Gulf and Caribbean, it is important for two reasons: It's one of the only pelican nesting sites in the upper Gulf, and it may represent the first time humans created a pelican nesting site rather than destroyed one.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 20,000 laughing gulls prowl around Gaillard's island as well, fishing in the Bay and making babies in the bushes. They make their nests in the ground next to the bushes, tufts of grass, pieces of wood.

A ring of rock riprap protects the island's shoreline. About 50 feet inside of that rubble wall, at the water's edge, a dirt berm rises up and encloses the island's interior. The berm stands around 25 feet high and is the tallest thing on the island. Thousands of adult pelicans sun themselves on top of the berm, watching over their nests down below. Most of the nesting takes place between the berm and the riprap.

Everywhere you look, there are pelican nests: in the scrubby bushes on the side of the berm, in the scrubby bushes down near the water, in the grass below the scrubby bushes, even atop old signs tossed ashore by hurricanes.

Walking among the birds, several odors fight for control of your nose, and all of them are awful. There's the stink of sun-baked guano (a scatological euphemism for bird mess). There's the stink of marsh muck. Then there's the stink of death.

And oddly, in a place so absolutely teeming with brand new life, there is a lot of death.



BILL STARLING/Staff Photographer

These birds, about 2 months old, most likely have never left their nest, located about 3 feet above the ground in a bush. Their feathers are filling in, and they will try out their wings in a couple of weeks.

There are dead fish all over — food that missed its mark in the transition from mama's mouth to baby's.

Little dead pelican babies are scattered around, too. Some fall out of the nests in the bushes and can't get back in. Some are pushed out by older siblings, greedy for all of mama's attention. And some babies, unlucky enough to hatch weeks after their siblings, simply can't compete with their older nestmates. They starve to death.

And a lot of dead full-grown pelicans, wings outstretched, heads akimbo, bodies disintegrating, litter the island. Pelicans are big, and a rotting one makes a powerful, and sad, impression.

"Some of them just don't make it. Accidents happen," said Roger Clay, a wildlife biologist with the state Conservation Department.

Clay visits the birds about once a week during roosting (mating) season, which begins as early as March and runs through August, peaking in May and June. He has been the bird man of Gaillard since 1986, dashing through the nesting sites counting the

nests, he carries a click counter in each hand — one for nests with eggs, one for nests without eggs. Clay says most nests start with three eggs, but only two hatchlings will survive.

The blood on many of the pelican eggs is evidence of what Clay calls "a painful process."

It's hard to keep up as he skips through the birds, moving fast so he disturbs them as little as possible.

Noisy youngsters grow up quickly

The first-born batch of fledglings, now downy and white with feathers and nearly as big as their parents, climb over each other, screaming as they run from Clay. They look ridiculous, gallumping through the brush on legs too wobbly to hold them up.

For these older babies, life is more of a free-wheeling, brawling sort of affair. The birds are no longer tied to the nest, and they tend to gather together in scrums of 20 or 30 stumbling, screaming birds. They'll lose the ability to make noise soon.

Adult pelicans are mute, Clay says, unable to muster even the screechy pterodactyl hiss the babies hurl at intruders.

At this point, though, they're plenty loud and growing so fast that the parents must work constantly at catching fish.

Soaring on powerful wings, the parents dive bomb into the Bay, scooping up menhaden and mullet, that great throats swelling with water as they gobble up dinner for the babies.

Down in the scrub, one of the big but still flightless babies has several inches of the tall end of a large mullet sticking out of his mouth. It's obviously been in his mouth a long time because the tail is hard and dry, with flies buzzing around it.

When Clay approaches, the bird opens its mouth to scold him and the 14-inch mullet pops out. It lands on the ground. Clay moves on, and the bird turns its attention to the fish, trying to figure out how to get it back into its mouth. The head of the mullet is dissolved. It's been getting digested down in the bird's gullet, even while the tail of the fish rotted in the open air.

Life on the island is rough.

Most of the Island's area is inside of the big dirt berm. It's a vast plain, with a few patches of short bushes. Pelicans nest in the patches. Mud flats extend toward the center of the island. The mud is crusty and cracked. Walking on it can be treacherous.

"That's one of the reasons we don't want people out here," Clay said. "You can be walking along on that mud and 'Bloop!' you sink in up to your neck. It just gives you. Nobody would ever know what happened to you."

Clay routinely picks his way along the edge of the mud to get to the tern-nesting site, a spot of unimaginable cacophony.

The terns nest on hard sand. They lay their eggs right on the sand, making do with barely perceptible depressions for nests. They lay their eggs close together: leaving just six inches between nests.

When threatened, 4,000 birds leap into the air at once, diving, feinting and making a powerful lot of noise. Conversation, even yelling, is impossible to hear over the din.

With 4,000 birds whirling overhead, you get the feeling it's raining all of a sudden, though there's not a cloud in the sky. But the dozens of drops splatting on your shoulders, your neck, your head, ain't rain.

A long lagoon stretches along one leg of the inner berm. Black-legged stilts hang out around the lagoon, where they like to nest. When approached, the stilts begin their broken-wing dance, designed to draw predators from their nests. A passing shadow can set 20 stilts flopping around in the mud, all dragging their wings as if somehow, they all spontaneously broke them.

A haven free from most predators

Nutria, great big rat-like creatures, are flourishing in the lagoon, thanks to the absence of predators on the island. Because nutria are vegetarians, they don't bother the birds. In fact, it is that same dearth of predators such as raccoons, snakes, possums and cats that has made the island a great place for birds and their babies.

The winged residents and the nutria can grow unmolested, save for occasional visits by Clay and his counters.

"A raccoon could really have a field day out here," Clay said. "So far we don't have any. I've seen two snakes and an alligator though. Of course, a couple of gators aren't going to hurt the birds any. Probably just prowl along the berm at night snatching a few."

A bigger danger to the successful rookery, says Clay, would be too many human visitors. When the island was in the development stages, there was talk of organizing tours and building walkways. Luckily, those ill-conceived ideas never went anywhere.

Perhaps the inhospitable nature of the place had something to do with that. By 9 in the morning on a summer day, it's blisteringly hot, and there's not a shade tree in sight. The stink is so bad it seeps into your clothes and seems to stay inside your nose for weeks. And then there is the bugs. Mosquitoes, sand flies and a host of other biting and stinging creatures make their presence known in a most unpleasant way.

But the pelicans aren't complaining.

