

Young pelicans have a precarious grasp on life

By **BEN RAINES**
Staff Reporter

For a pelican on Mobile Bay, the living looks easy:

- Hang out on top of old dock pilings.
- Eat mullet.
- Fly around.

But there's a dark side, and a lot of pelicans die young.

Soaring 60 feet above the water, adult pelicans spend their time hunting for the telltale glimmer of fish below the surface. The 9-pound birds eat about 4 pounds of fish a day. But plunging downward, mouth agape, is a tricky business, and some birds never get the hang of it.

John Winn, a retired ecologist with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, discovered the first pelicans that nested on Gaillard Island back in 1983. He's made studying them a hobby and served on the board of directors of the Audubon Society for a time.

Winn said the mortality rate among young pelicans is relatively high.

"The young are always the most vulnerable," Winn said. "They are inexperienced and have to learn some complicated things to survive."

Young birds sometimes misjudge the depth of the water below them. Diving on a school of fish in the shallows, they crash through the surface and can break their necks on the bottom.

Some never learn to adjust for the visual tricks played by refraction at the water's surface. They are forever diving a few inches off the mark, missing their prey and ultimately starving to death.

Other, hunting around fishing piers, successfully capture a fish, only to discover it has a hook in it. With a fisherman's bait trapped in its mouth, the bird can become hopelessly entangled in monofilament line and starve to death.

Winn said that if there is a bad season for mullet, some birds will die because they can't catch enough to survive. Extended periods of cloudy water can lead to the same end.

The birds also can fall victim to cold winters. A hard freeze can turn their beaks and feet to ice. They don't recover.

A hole in the pouch of a pelican's bill, perhaps poked by a stray fin, can kill them too. Fish rush out of the hole with the water before the bird can eat them. Gangrene will set in and kill its host.

Historically, pelicans have had a rough time of it for other reasons.

According to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they were hunted intensely at the turn of the century, their feathers ending up in ladies' hats. Then, misinformed commercial fisherman decided the birds were harming their fisheries. Considered a pest, thousands were shot by the fisherman in the 1920s.

Winn said he has heard stories of people in Depression-era Mobile selling pelican meat and wild goose.

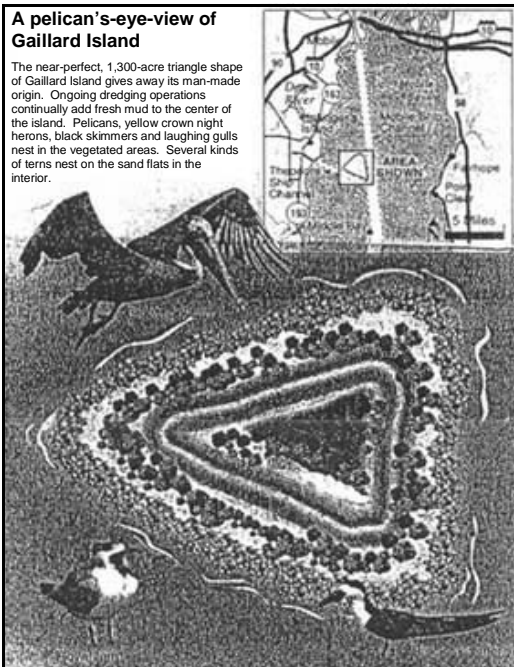
"They say people would nail a mullet to a board and then sink the board underwater. When the pelican would dive on it, he'd break his neck on the board," Winn said. "They'd sell them in town for a buck a bird. I don't think they would taste very good."

In the '50s and '60s, widespread use of the pesticide DOT nearly caused the birds' extinction. They ended up on the endangered species list in 1970 but made it off the list in 1986, thanks to places such as Gaillard Island.



BILL STARLING/Staff Photographer

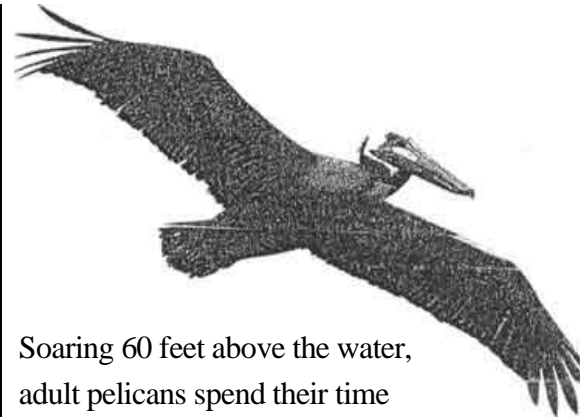
Newly born and mad at the world, a baby hisses aggressively at all who approach. They are born blind and seem to sounds and changes in light around them. In two and a half months, they will have gained 9 pounds and left the nest.



A pelican's-eye-view of Gaillard Island

The near-perfect, 1,300-acre triangle shape of Gaillard Island gives away its man-made origin. Ongoing dredging operations continually add fresh mud to the center of the island. Pelicans, yellow crown night herons, black skimmers and laughing gulls nest in the vegetated areas. Several kinds of terns nest on the sand flats in the interior.

Register graphic



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The 'bird Man of Gaillard,' Roger Clay, walks along the sometimes treacherous surface of the muddy island in the middle of Mobile Bay. A fish and game biologist with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Clay has, since 1986, visited the island weekly during the rooking season. The season runs from March through August.