

Endangered^{no}More?

The California subspecies of Brown Pelican might fly from the Endangered Species List.

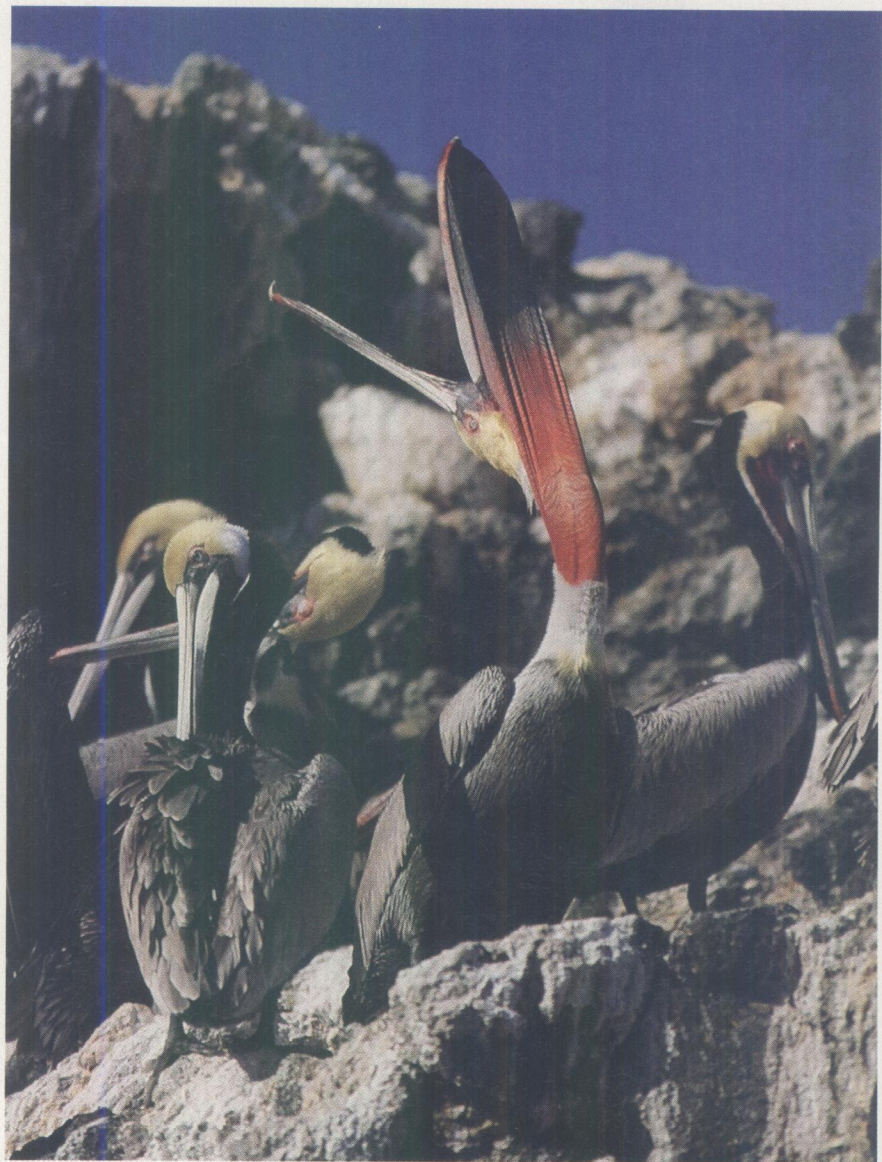
Text and photo by Chuck Graham

Over the last 10 years, while guiding kayak tours at Anacapa Island and along the southeast end of Santa Cruz Island — part of the Channel Islands National Park — I've always seen one seabird more than any other species that clutters the volcanic sea stacks and craggy spires at locations like Cathedral Cove and Scorpion Rock. As the years have blown by, I thought it was just me, but it seemed like there was a steady increase in the population of California Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis californicus*).

In early February, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne proposed removing the California Brown Pelican from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Endangered Species List. A 2006 petition from a nonprofit group of international scientists spurred the proposal. Public comments were taken until mid-April, and the proposal could become final in a year.

"We're in the process of evaluating those comments," said Michael McCrary, listing and recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura, Calif. "We're also looking for additional information that would be pertinent to the delisting decision."

Opposition to the delisting is expected to be minimal, because California Brown Pelican populations are as great as, if not exceeding, historic levels across the west, east and Gulf coasts of North America, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Encompassing the six subspecies of *Pelecanus occidentalis* are approximately 620,000 of these gregarious, social birds



known for their comical posturing and seven-foot wingspans while soaring in perfect formation. The ungainly seabirds were named a national endangered species in 1970, three years before the Endangered Species Act was passed.

"The legal protections provided by the

Endangered Species Act, coupled with the banning of DDT in 1972, provided the means for the service and its partners to accelerate the pelican's recovery," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director H. Dale Hall. "State wildlife agencies, universities, private ornithological groups

and individuals participated in reintroduction efforts and helped protect nest sites during the breeding season.”

Brown Pelicans made such a stirring comeback in Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and Florida and along the Atlantic coast that those birds were delisted by 1985. Removing the pelican from the list means federal agencies no longer are required to consult with the USFWS to ensure that their activities don't harm pelicans. Hall said, however, pelicans will remain protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Lacey Act.

“We wouldn't have gone down this road,” McCrary continued, “if we didn't think this was the appropriate course of action.”

Pelicans are great indicators for ocean environments' health. They're one of the most recognizable creatures on mainland beaches with their long swordlike beaks as they dive headfirst into the ocean to fill their pouches full of anchovies. When you don't see them, you know something is out of balance in the food chain.

In the 1960s, the pesticide DDT was just being recognized as a chemical with grave effects on the aquatic food web. It caused pelicans and other seabirds, Peregrine Falcons and Bald Eagles to lay thin-shelled eggs that were crushed during their incubation cycles.

Anacapa and Santa Barbara islands provide the primary rookeries of Brown Pelicans on the west coast of the United States, due to their dry, secure and quiet roosting and nesting places. In 1970, only one chick out of 550 nests survived.

Over the past decade, however, the species' populations have rebounded dramatically. Above the sheer 300-foot-high cliffs on West Anacapa Island, the annual average has been 4,600 nesting pairs. In 2004, the Anacapa breeding population peaked at nearly 8,000 nesting pairs.

To the south on tiny Santa Barbara Island, there has been an annual average of about 1,500 nesting pairs, with an estimat-

ed high of 4,000 nests in 2006. Pelicans on that island nest in different locations each nesting season. A couple of years ago, they took up nesting at Landing Cove, the only place for visitors to get on the island. The tiniest island off California was closed to visitors until breeding and nesting season ended.

“The recovery of pelicans is a tremendous milestone for conservation in our country,” said Channel Islands National Park Superintendent Russell Galipeau. “This species has been safeguarded by the Endangered Species Act, as well as sheltered within a national park, on remote islands that provide undisturbed nesting and roosting habitat.”

Although a delisting appears imminent, Brown Pelicans will continue to be monitored by conservation groups, because DDT remains prominent in the aquatic ecosystem, especially between Los Angeles and Catalina Island. Millions of tons of the toxins were dumped near the island from the 1940s until the mid-1970s.

Wal-Mart's promise to Mother Nature

Acres for America protects nearly 400,000 acres of land so far.

Wal-Mart's venture into the “green” movement has resulted in the conservation of habitat throughout the country, including forestland in California as well as grasslands and wetlands in North and South Dakota. Under the Acres for America program, the retailer intends to offset its land footprint through 2015, acre for acre.

Nearly 400,000 acres have been preserved. That's triple the goal set in 2005, when the program was launched by National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with founding corporate

partner Wal-Mart.

The retail giant pledged \$35 million over 10 years to the project, declaring a commitment to set aside land to make up for its land use through 2015. Twice a year, NFWF offers a grant program for conservation groups to help acquire lands that meet Acres for America criteria.

More than a dozen criteria affect the selection process, including benefits to birds and other wildlife. Organizations that have received grants include The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund.

To date, The Conservation Fund has received four grants through the program, according to spokeswoman Vanessa Vaughan. The projects include redwood forest protection and management in California; Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership in Maine; Catahoula National Wildlife Refuge Expansion in Louisiana; and Kane Ranch and Two Mile Ranch acquisition in Arizona.

“Wal-Mart has a strong commitment to balancing economic and environmental objectives and has become an innovative leader in the industry by recognizing — and offsetting — its development footprint,” Vaughan said. “Acres for America is a remarkable program that has most recently allowed us to protect the incredible natural resources that are livelihood of North Coast communities, and it could be used as a model for others to implement across the country.”

In 2007, a \$1 million grant to Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited Inc. protects

AcresforAmerica

Signature projects:

Catahoula National Wildlife Refuge, La.
 Sherfield Cave and the Headwaters
 of the Buffalo National River, Ark.
 North Rim of the Grand Canyon, Ariz.
 Back to Home Waters/ Squaw Creek, Ore.
 Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership, Maine

THAN A DOZEN CRITERIA AFFECT THE SELECTION PROCESS, INCLUDING BENEFITS TO BIRDS AND OTHER WILDLIFE.

more than 8,500 acres in the Prairie Pothole Region of North and South Dakota. Wal-Mart's \$700,000 donation and \$300,000 in NFWF federal funds protect 10,785 acres of prairie pothole grasslands and wetlands that serve as home and breeding grounds for 200 species of songbirds, waterfowl, raptors and game birds.

Birds have benefitted greatly from the awards, said Peter Stangel, NFWF's director of science and evaluation and *WildBird* Conservation Corner columnist. One of the first projects, and the largest to date, he said, is the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership in Maine.

Wal-Mart committed \$6 million over 10 years to help place a conservation easement on 312,000 acres of forestland in Maine. The deal, completed by the New England Forestry Foundation and the Downeast Lakes Land Trust, creates

342,000 acres of contiguous forests and waterways permanently protected from development, Stangel said.

"An astounding 1,500 miles of river and stream shorelines were protected," he said, "and the 60 lakes on the property offer 450 miles of shoreline habitat for a wide variety of birds."

In addition, at least eight active Bald Eagle nests occur on this land, which is estimated to harbor about 10 percent of northern Maine's nesting Common Loons, he said. These forests also provide habitat for more than 23 species of warblers, and 54,000 acres of wetlands offer nesting sites for the declining American Black Duck.

"This program epitomizes public-private partnerships," Stangel said. "Wal-Mart established themselves as a leader in environmental programs by voluntarily offsetting their facilities footprint with perma-

nently protected conservation land — a first, as far as we know, for a major retailer."

While certainly in favor of Wal-Mart's efforts to conserve wildlife habitat, concern remains about the sites selected for development, said David Willatt, a spokesman for Sierra Club. It's important to consider a store's impact on the surrounding environment, he said, before a parking lot is built next to a wetland.

"It's great to set aside a corresponding acreage elsewhere, but what is the value of the land you're actually developing?" he said. "The one thing you can say about Wal-Mart is that they definitely have started to understand that their environmental impact is something that people care about, and it might affect whether they shop there."

A Wal-Mart spokesman was not available to comment. — *Soraya Gutierrez*