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THE PELICAN PILOT

by

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The white pelican is one of the largest American birds and it is a perfect picture of aerial grace and dignity. With orange pouch and wide-spreading black wings, it is a majestic flier. It is a daily habit of these birds during the nesting season to take an aerial promenade each morning. They begin to circle over the colony in a large company, rising higher and higher till they are almost lost in the blue. So high are they that only flashes of the sun on their snowy breasts tell where they are. At a distance over the flat surface of a lake, there is something distorted and spooky about a flock of pelicans riding neck to neck. They look, for all the world, like a squadron of white war ships.

While this bird is known as a feathered fisherman, some anglers have advocated treating him like a Jap. Pelicans prefer to fish in the big, shallow lakes of southern Oregon and they live on suckers, carp, and trash fish that are of no use to man.

In the early days, there were large colonies of white pelicans in the lake regions of southern Oregon. Ten years ago when Malheur, Tule, and Lower Klamath Lakes were dried up, these birds conspicuous in size and color, disappeared. Where the lakes have been re-flooded, this fleet of white airplanes has returned to their old home bases.

The first time I ever saw a motley crowd of half-grown pelicans, I thought Nature had surely done her best to make something ugly and ridiculous. It was a warm day and the lumpy birds stood around with their mouths open, panting like a lot of dogs after a chase, their pouches shaking at every breath. When I went near, the youngsters went tottering off on their big webbed feet with wings dragging on this side and on that, like poorly handled crutches. They huddled together by hundreds in a small place. Those on the outside pushed and climbed to get near the center, till it looked worse than any football scrimmage I ever saw.

One might wonder how such a huge-billed bird as a pelican could feed helpless chicks just out of the eggs. It was done with apparent ease. The old bird regurgitated a fishy soup into the front end of his pouch and the baby pelican pitched right in and helped himself out of the family dish.