

*Paula Pelican: Life on the Lagoon* was inspired by personal observation.

They are an amazing bird and have been around for over 40 million years. Pelicans in the wild can live to be about 20-25 years old. They were known as domestic birds in ancient Egypt and as fishing helpers in India. The pelican was a symbol of maternal love in early Christianity. The figure of the pelican as a martyr and a model of human mercy appears in the art of the Middle Ages, as well as on coats of arms. It is presently the state bird of Louisiana, USA. It is also one of the mascots of Tulane University and is on its seal because of the Louisiana connection.

They are strong swimmers and use their four-toed webbed feet to push through the water. Brown pelicans can sight a fish when flying at heights up to 75 feet in the air and then will dive headfirst into the water. Depending on the height of the dive, they can submerge completely or only partially. The brown pelican has air sacs under their skin which protect them from the impact of hitting the water during a high dive. These air sacs help them surface when underwater, like a balloon would pop out from underneath water. Brown pelicans seem to be the only species that uses this method of fishing. Whereas brown pelicans plunge-dive for their food from great heights, the white pelicans have a different strategy ... they will form a line to chase schools of small fish into shallow water and then

scoop them up. Seagulls often sit on a pelican's head and try to steal a meal when the pelican opens its bill slightly to empty out the water.

Because of their strong breast muscles, they can hold their wings rigidly horizontal for gliding and soaring, and can travel hundreds of miles a day to feeding areas. They take advantage of rising warm air currents to carry them without having to flap their wings often.

Pelicans are extremely social birds and often fly in flocks, usually in a single line, sometimes in "V" formation. A group of pelicans is called a pod. Getting up into the air from the water can be quite difficult.

They must hop over the water, beat their large wings and pound the surface of the water with both feet together to get enough speed to take off into the air, while paying attention to wind direction.