

An Unusual Pelican In Beaver County ?

by Ed Kwater

In early June 1994 an immature pelican, *Pelecanus* sp. turned up near the mouth of the Beaver River, in the town of Bridgewater, Beaver County. Initially no birders were aware of the bird's presence but the birding community was alerted following an article in a local newspaper in late June. I first observed the bird on June 27th and immediately suspected that it was not a typical American White Pelican, *P. erythrorhynchus*, as others had reported. Standing above the bird on the riverbank I observed thick longitudinal black streaks on the outer webs of the exposed tertials on the folded wings (Fig.1). When the bird flew all the primaries and secondaries appeared black except that the innermost few secondaries had narrow white fringes to their outer webs. Only the upperwing pattern could be seen, however. The bird flew upstream and was lost to view after only a few minutes of observation. The NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America states that only the primaries and outer secondaries on American White Pelicans are black with the remainder of the plumage being white. Several other authors support this assertion (Harrison,1983; Johnsgard,1993).

Intrigued by the field characters I had observed and frustrated by rather brief views I reviewed all the information I could find on white pelicans. The wing pattern seemed to suggest an Eastern White Pelican, *P. onocrotalus*, an old world species breeding in Europe, western Russia and parts of Africa, and wintering in Africa. In Eastern White Pelicans all the primaries and secondaries are black from below and show the pattern described for the Beaver County bird from above. The tertials are white from below and again show the pattern described for the Bridgewater individual on their uppersides (Cramp & Simmons,1977; Harrison,1983; Johnsgard,1993). In contrast all the American White Pelicans I have seen show white inner secondaries both on the upperwing and underwing. Was this an escaped Eastern White Pelican or just an aberrant American White Pelican ?

Returning to the site the

following day I quickly relocated the bird and on this occasion it showed exceptionally well for one and a half hours, allowing a critical examination of the plumage and the pattern and color of the bare parts. It flew around several times and the underwing pattern could clearly be seen. All the primaries and secondaries were black matching the pattern of *P. onocrotalus* perfectly. Turning my attention to the rest of the plumage I noted that the bird was mainly white with conspicuous brown spotting on the lesser and median coverts of the upperwing indicating second year plumage (Johnsgard1993). The pattern of the bill and facial skin appeared normal for an American White Pelican. The upper mandible was pinkish-orange with a bright orange nail and the lower mandible and throat pouch were yellowish-orange. The bare skin around the eye was dirty yellowish in color, and much less extensive than in Eastern White Pelican. In the latter the white feathering on the head curves round below the eye and comes to a blunt point, not extending in front of the eye. In American White Pelicans the white feathering extends well in front of the eye and in a narrower point, resulting in a less "bare-faced" look (Fig.2). The bird apparently showed the head pattern of an American White Pelican and the wing pattern of an Eastern White Pelican. A hybrid origin was considered but this would have been difficult to prove conclusively through field observation.

Still uncertain what to think I enlisted the help of Paul Lehman and Richard Crossley who very kindly examined the photographs and a video taken by Walt Shafer. Paul spoke to several people in California who were thoroughly familiar with American White Pelicans at the Salton Sea. All agreed that no American Whites should show all the secondaries black in the upperwing but some have only the inner twenty-five per cent of the secondaries white then the next few striped black and white and the remainder black. Despite this, all expert opinion eventually favored identification of the Beaver County bird as an American White Pelican due

to the inescapable fact that the pattern of the facial skin and surrounding feathering matched that species exactly.

All the photographs of American Whites I have examined and birds I have paid close attention to since the Bridgewater sighting have shown the inner fifty per cent of the secondaries white, quite unlike the Beaver County bird. However I subsequently examined eight specimens of American White Pelicans (two full study skins and six spread wings) at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh and found that seven of them had upper- and underwing patterns that were virtually identical to the Beaver County bird (Fig.3). I suspected that these were all immature birds (the labels didn't give age details) based on the extensive brown spotting on the upperwing coverts.

The presence of black inner secondaries in American White Pelicans is therefore probably not as unusual as the available literature would lead us to believe and many field guides are rather misleading on this issue. Observers are strongly cautioned to bear these factors in mind when faced with the identification of any vagrant pelican in Pennsylvania.

The behavior of the Beaver County bird led to a suspicion of captive origin despite the total lack of signs of captivity such as leg bands.



Fig 1. American White Pelican on the Beaver River, June 1994. The exposed, black innermost tertial can just be seen on the folded wing.



Fig 3. Underwing pattern of an American White Pelican showing all black inner secondaries.
Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh.

It frequently approached fishermen to within two feet and successfully begged fish from them on numerous occasions. However I have observed wild Brown Pelicans, *P. occidentalis*, behaving in a similar manner in Florida, and Ted Floyd (pers. comm.) informs me that American White Pelicans at Cheyenne Bottoms in Kansas routinely allow a very close approach.

Late June might seem like an unusual time for American White Pelicans to occur in Pennsylvania but there are in fact several records for the Commonwealth at this season (Todd, 1940; Santner et. al., 1992). This record has been submitted to the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee and currently awaits review.

Acknowledgments.

I am especially grateful to Paul Lehman and Richard Crossley for reviewing photographs of this bird and making useful comments. Thanks are also due to Jon Dunn, Guy McCaskie, and Ted Floyd for their valuable input. I am indebted to Dr. Ken Parkes and Robin Panza of the Section of Birds at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh for allowing access to the skin collection there and for commenting on this bird.

References.

- Cramp S. and K.E.L. Simmons 1977. Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press.
- Harrison P. 1983. Seabirds - an Identification Guide. Croom Helm.
- Johnsgard P.A. 1993. Cormorants, Darters and Pelicans of the World. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington D.C.
- National Geographic Society 1985. Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 2nd edition.
- Santner S.J., D.W. Brauning, G. Schwalbe and P.W. Schwalbe 1992. Annotated List of the Birds of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Biological Survey.
- Todd W.E.C. 1940. Birds of Western Pennsylvania. University of Pittsburgh. ♣

222 Franklin Street
Evans City, PA 16033

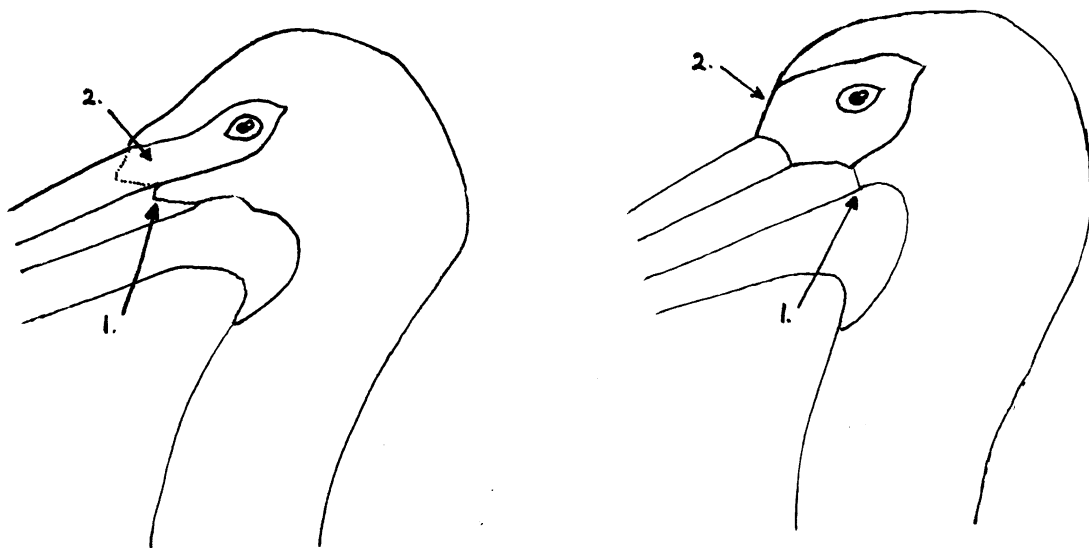


Figure 2. A comparison of the facial feathering in American White Pelican and Eastern White Pelican.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

Date of Sighting: 27 June 1994 to 27 June 1994

Location: BEAVER RIVER

County: BEAVER

Observer(s): Ed Kwater

Date of Submission: 1994

Submitted by: Ed Kwater

Written Description: YES

Photo: YES

Specimen: NO

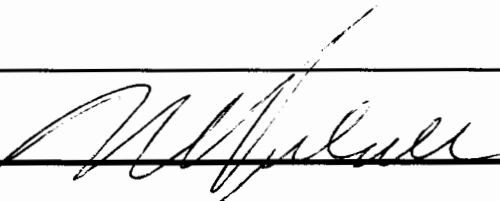
Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas	X							
P. Schwalbe	X							
K. Parkes								X
R. Ickes	X							
P. Hess	X							
J. McWilliams	X							
T. Floyd	X							
TOTALS	6							1
DECISION	X							

Comments:

See Article in PB 11:2 P35

Signature (Secretary):



Date:

6/26/94