

AUSTRALIAN PELICANS IN CANTERBURY

Australian Pelicans (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) were reported in Canterbury from 18 December 1977 to 4 June 1978. During this period sightings of one and two birds were reported from a number of localities and three birds were reported from one locality.

The first sighting (18 December) was of a single bird on the Opihi River, at Butler's Crossing, Pleasant Point, by P. W. Welch, reported in the *Timaru Herald* of 23 December. A local fisherman reported to me subsequently that a pelican visited the Opihi River mouth daily throughout January and February. On 22 December, a pelican was seen by D. Warren on his farm pond, which is on the north side of the Rangitata River near the Arundel bridge and, at about the same time, two large birds, apparently pelicans, were seen flying farther upstream, near Peel Forest. One was reported from the Rangitata River mouth in early January by S. Robertson. A pelican was seen at Washdyke Lagoon on 3 January by F. B. Ross. This bird stayed in the area and from mid-February was joined by another



FIGURE 1 — Australian Pelicans on the South Canterbury Coast, February, 1978.
Photo: *Timaru Herald*

bird. These birds were seen on the lagoon frequently until at least 11 March. During this period they probably commuted the 10 km to the Opihi River mouth where sightings of two pelicans were also reported.

After 11 March the pelicans began moving greater distances. On 19 March two were seen at Lake Wainono, 50 km farther south, by P. C. M. Latham. Two were back at the Opihi River mouth from 24 to 27 March and then from late March to early April local residents reported up to three pelicans together in the Lake Wainono area. They were last seen in this area on 4 April and by 11 April two had returned to Washdyke Lagoon.

A more distant sighting was made on 16 February by G. Guy on the coast at Birdlings Flat, at the northern end of Lake Ellesmere. He saw a pelican flying north, about 200 m offshore. This bird was observed until it disappeared finally into the distance.

On 27 April, following a report in the *Timaru Herald*, I searched the Seadown Beach just north of Washdyke Lagoon and found a dead immature female pelican in moult (det. J. A. Bartle, National Museum, Wellington). It had been shot and had been dead about a week.

The last reported sighting (4 June) was of a single bird on a farm pond in the Morven/Glenavy area of South Canterbury.

These sightings show that pelicans move about from one water body to another over a short period of time. Because of this it is difficult to ascertain the total number of birds in a particular area. Sightings from South Canterbury show that there were at least three pelicans in the area. The Birdlings Flat pelican was probably a fourth bird.

The pelicans were seen mainly on shallow coastal waters and occasionally on the sea, close inshore. When not swimming the birds were resting either on low mud banks or in shallow water.

Before 1976 there had been only one record of this species from New Zealand, on the Wanganui River in 1890 (OSNZ Checklist, 1970). In August/September 1976 one was seen in the Kaipara Harbour (Edgar 1978, *Notornis* 25: 89-90) and one died in Southland in late November 1977. During July and August 1977 there was an apparent influx of Australian Pelicans to mainland New Guinea and its outlying islands (Newsletter 135, New Guinea Bird Society). It was suggested that this influx was related to the drying out of the central Australian 'desert,' which had held pelicans for some years. These latest New Zealand sightings show that Australian Pelicans have moved greater distances in their search for suitable habitat.

I thank Mr F. B. Ross and Mr G. Guy for making their observations and notes available to me.

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[See further records of these pelicans in Class. Summ. Notes, this issue. — Ed.]