



## Birds of Barrington: WHITE PELICAN

**B**arrington hosts a fair number of large birds, ones that exceed four feet in length or six feet in wingspan. Think Great Blue Heron, Barrington's official town bird, or Bald Eagle, a species that has been spotted regularly around Baker's Lake, or Osprey. But there's an even larger bird that can be seen locally in large lakes. It does not stay to breed as do the others but visits only during spring on its way to northern breeding grounds in the prairie pothole region of Montana and Western Canada. The bird? The American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*), a water bird that has a wingspan of a whopping eight to nine feet and measures over five feet long.

I first heard reports of pelicans on Baker's Lake perhaps 20 years ago, from a friend who lives on the southwest cove. Frankly, I was skeptical. But my friend was right. When I first saw the pelicans for myself, with a group of birders on a scheduled walk to Baker's Lake Savanna, we were thrilled to spot the enormous white creatures resting on a mud flat just east of the island rookery.

Chuck Westcott, former director of Crabtree Nature Center, told me that there's speculation that flooding of the Mississippi River in 1993

caused the birds to alter their migratory path eastward. He missed the first ones reported on Crabtree Lake in 1994, but got to see them there several years ago when pelicans lingered into June. Sometimes as many as 50 gathered on the lake. In recent years, American White Pelicans have become regular springtime visitors to Baker's Lake and other large lakes in the area. On early May bird walks at the adjacent savanna, we've watched a flotilla of the birds feeding en masse, frequently tipping up in unison as they dipped their large bills for fish. White pelicans have a feeding strategy entirely different from that of their Brown Pelican relatives: they move through the water as a unit, herding fish and using their lower mandibles as giant nets.

White pelicans are a vision in flight. Whatever awkwardness they exhibit on land drops away once they're airborne. Those long, brilliantly white wings edged with black flight feathers carry them majestically aloft. There's no furious flapping, just a seemingly effortless glide and occasional wing dip. Sunlight renders their wings a brilliant white and give any viewer an instant sensation of awe.

Most of the pelicans I have seen this spring have an elongated knob on the top of the upper bill. It's a curious growth that appears each breeding season on the bills of both males and females and which differentiates the species from their Old-World counterparts. John James Audubon noted the difference in his notebooks:

*"I feel great pleasure, good reader, in assuring you, that our White Pelican, which has hitherto been considered the same as that found in Europe, is quite different. In consequence of this discovery, I have honoured it with the name of my beloved country, over the mighty streams of which, may this splendid bird wander free and unmolested to the most distant times, as it has already done from the misty ages of unknown antiquity."*

Echoing Audubon's wish, I too hope that American White Pelicans will continue to grace our local lakes in spring and that Barringtonians will come out and savor the spectacle. 



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PHOTO: LINDA M. BARRETT

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