

BIRD IN THE HAND

Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

by W. J. M. Vestjens (Posthumous), CSIRO,
Division of Wildlife Research, Canberra.

This guide is based on a study carried out by Vestjens (1977) on the breeding behaviour and ecology of the Australian Pelican at Lake George and Lake Cowal, N.S.W. from 1968 to 1976, and on captive birds. It is the only species of pelican that occurs in Australasia.

Individual colour differences slowly disappear; in a group of eight young birds of the same age, kept in an enclosure, two looked the same at 70 days of age, and all were the same by 132 days.

AGEING

Chick

Newly hatched chicks are naked, orange-pink in colour and open-eyed. Within a week they are covered with short grey down. The colours and down on the head and neck, are variable as shown in Table 1.

Juvenile

The plumage is brown in areas which are black in adults. Wing coverts are short. The bill and gular pouch are flesh colour, the tip of the bill is bright orange, the head is white, grey or brown, the naked skin around the eye is flesh colour, and the legs and feet are brownish grey.

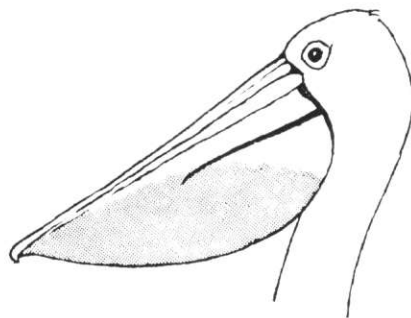
TABLE 1

Colour variations in 34 young at Lake Cowal.

No. of young	Colour of iris	Colour of bill	Colour of naked skin round eye	Head and neck plumage
3	Grey	Mottled	Black	Grey
2	Grey	Fleshy	Fleshy	White
2	Grey	Black	Black	Brown
1	Grey	Fleshy	Black	Grey
2	Grey	Mottled	Fleshy with black border	Brown
3	Dark brown	Dark grey	Fleshy	White
1	Dark brown	Fleshy	Black	White
1	Dark brown	Dark grey	Black	White
1	Dark brown	Black	Fleshy	Grey
4	Dark brown	Black	Black	Brown
3	Dark brown	Mottled	Fleshy	Grey
5	Dark brown	Mottled	Black	White
5	Dark brown	Fleshy	Fleshy	White
1	Dark brown	Fleshy	Fleshy with black border	White

Immature

The plumage colours are as in non-breeding birds but the wing coverts are short and the feet are grey. The bill and throat are pink, and the legs and feet are grey.



• Figure 1. Pattern on pouch of courting bird.

Non-breeding Bird

The bill is pale blue with pinkish ridge, and the gular pouch is pinkish yellow. The iris is brown and the ring around the eye is yellow. The pouch area is separated from the feathered neck by a narrow faint black band of naked skin. The legs and feet are slate blue.

Incubating Bird

The colours of bill and gular pouch fade gradually to orange-pink during incubation. The dark stripe across the gular pouch changes from dark blue to red, thus distinguishing incubating from non-breeding birds.

SEXING

The sexes differ in size, but not in plumage. Males are larger and taller than females and have longer bills. The bill length of 18 adult males ranged from 409 to 500 mm, and that of nine adult females from 346 to 398 mm.

Differences in body size may be used for identification of sexes in pairs or groups of birds, and differences in bill length for identification of individual birds in the hand.

Courting Adult

The central ridge of the bill is pink; three-quarters of the length of the mandible at the edge is slate blue, the front parts and the hook are yellow-orange. The distal two-thirds of the gular pouch is bright scarlet, the rest is pink, and the base of the pouch has a narrow dark blue edge from which a prominent dark blue stripe runs parallel and alongside the bill into the scarlet area (Fig. 1). The naked ring around the eye is yellow-orange.

The courtship colours appeared in one captive bird at 4 years old. In others they did not show after 6 years. The colours appear in the wild about 3 weeks before pair-formation and fade soon after the nest site is selected.

Reference

- Vestjens, W. J. M. (1977) 'Breeding Behaviour and Ecology of the Australian Pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, in New South Wales', *Aust. Wildl. Res.* 4: 37-58.