

## **American White Pelican by Rebecca Lexa**

What are those big, white birds way up in the sky? Not snow geese! They're American white pelicans! Many people are familiar with brown pelicans out over the ocean, but white pelicans often travel inland as far as the Midwest, and can be seen on waterways locally this time of year. As their name suggests they are white with black feathers on their wings, and have a bright orange bill. Unlike brown pelicans, they catch their food while swimming, and do not dive underwater.

White pelicans breed in spring, and chicks are born by early summer. Usually only one chick survives to leave the nest at one month of age. All the youngsters in a breeding colony will stay together in a crèche, where they grow flight feathers and learn to fly while still being fed by their parents. By September the young birds will be ready for the big migration south, and all the pelicans in the area prepare to group together for this move.

While white pelican numbers are flourishing today, in the mid-20th century the population took a serious dive due to DDT and various agricultural chemicals. Stricter laws regulating or banning these substances led directly to the rebound of this bird, as well as other threatened species. Today, the biggest threats to white pelicans are habitat loss, entanglement in fishing gear, being hit by boats, and poaching. Willapa National Wildlife Refuge offers a safe haven for these magnificent soaring birds.