

Gov't says brown pelicans are endangered no longer

November 11 2009, By DINA CAPPIELLO , Associated Press Writer



In this Feb 15, 2007 file photo, an American Brown Pelican skims the water as it searches for fish in Miami Beach, Fla. After nearly 40 years on the brink of extinction, the brown pelican is coming off the endangered species list. (AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee, FILE)

(AP) -- Much like its death-defying dives for fish, the brown pelican has resurfaced after plummeting to the brink of extinction.

Interior Department officials on Wednesday announced that they were taking the bird off the endangered species list, after a nearly four-decade struggle to keep the brown pelican population afloat.

The bird now prevalent across Florida, the Gulf and Pacific coasts and the Caribbean was declared an endangered species in 1970, after its population - much like those of the bald eagle and peregrine falcon - was

decimated by the use of the pesticide DDT. The chemical, consumed when the pelican ate tainted fish, caused it to lay eggs with shells so thin they broke during incubation.

The pelican's recovery is largely due to a 1972 ban on DDT, coupled with efforts by states and conservation groups to protect its nesting sites and monitor its population, Interior Department officials said.

"Today we can say the brown pelican is back," said Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in a conference call with reporters in Washington. "Once again, we see healthy flocks of these graceful birds flying over our shores. The brown pelican is endangered no longer."

The official announcement came earlier at a press conference at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, which is dubbed the "Pelican State". The bird has been on the state's official seal since 1804, but the pelican had virtually disappeared from its coasts in the 1960s.

"It's been a long journey," said Tom Strickland, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, parks for the Interior Department. "It's tracked my whole adult life."

Strickland acknowledged that the bird's coastal habitat was in danger from rising seas and erosion, but he said wildlife officials were confident the bird was ready to be taken off the list.

The plight of the brown pelican has tracked closely with the development and birth of the nation's environmental policy and the environmental movement. It was listed as endangered before Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973. And its struggle for survival, initially due to hunting for feathers to decorate hats, led to the birth of the National Wildlife Refuge System more than 100 years ago.

That's when President Theodore Roosevelt created the first refuge at Pelican Island in Florida.

Nowadays, the bird is prevalent along the coasts of Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, California, Washington and Oregon. It can be seen dramatically diving headfirst into the water to emerge with a mouthful of fish.

The Bush administration in early 2008 proposed removing the bird from the [endangered species](#) list. In 1985, the Fish and Wildlife Service eliminated brown pelicans living in Alabama, Georgia, Florida and up the Atlantic Coast from the list.

Some environmentalists Wednesday said that they would like to see populations in the Western Gulf and the Caribbean stay on the list. Along the Gulf Coast the concern is that the population lives on low-lying islands and coasts vulnerable to hurricanes and the rising sea levels expected to come with global warming. In the Caribbean, the question is whether the population has been sufficiently monitored.

"We remain very concerned with the long-term viability in the face of global warming and hurricanes," said Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity. "We would prefer to see the federal government secure long-term agreements (along the Gulf) to ensure coastal nesting habitat is going to be restored and protected in perpetuity."

The announcement does not remove all protections for the species. It will still be protected by other laws, such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

On the Net:

Fish and Wildlife Service: <http://tinyurl.com/ygvbbxe>

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