

Israeli fish farmers give peckish pelicans free lunch

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Great white pelicans eat fish provided by Israeli farmers at a water reservoir in the Emek Hefer valley north of Tel Aviv

Migratory pelicans have long raided Israeli fish farms, which try to deter them with loudspeakers, laser beams and by firing blank rounds from

rifles.

In their desperation, they have come up with another way: offering the birds a free lunch.

An estimated 50,000 pelicans stop off in Israel during their annual migration from the Balkans to Africa, where they enjoy a mild winter before returning to Europe.

They rest and feed in the Middle Eastern country for weeks, causing chaos for [fish](#) farmers, whose outdoor commercial pools and reservoirs provide rich pickings.

Before the pelicans reach Israel, "they have nowhere to stop and eat", said Eli Sharir, general manager of the Israel Fish Breeders Association.

The impact on the fish farms is enormous.

"We're talking millions of shekels a year," he said.

So six years ago Israeli fisherman came up with a solution—providing alternative feed with unmarketable fish to try to keep pelicans away from the commercial pools.

One recent day on a reservoir in northern Israel, hundreds of great white pelicans swooped down to position themselves in the [shallow waters](#), eyeing a truck backing up to the water's edge.

Then the truck dropped its cargo of thousands of small, live, flapping fish into the water, where they were almost instantly scooped up by the pelicans' nimble beaks.



An Israeli Nature and Parks Authority employee feeds fish to pelicans so they don't raid commercial fish pools instead

Luxury stop-over

Pisciculture is limited in Israel, producing just 10 percent of the fish consumed domestically.

But it is vital for the small agricultural communities of Emek Hamaayanot, the lush area below the Gilboa mountain range in northeastern Israel often dubbed the "valley of the springs."

So to protect their livelihoods, the farmers in the Sharon region, north of Tel Aviv, and Hula valley, near Israel's eastern border with Lebanon,

have joined forces with the Nature and Parks Authority to create the alternative feeding sites.

But not everyone believes it's a good idea. Critics say the birds may get used to making the luxurious stop-over in Israel—and may even be enticed to stay the entire winter.

So fish farmers still rely on a toolkit of other ways to scare off the birds—without harming them, as pelicans are protected under international conventions.

Dor Maimon, who works for the area's farmers in protecting produce from [wild animals](#), uses a remote-controlled, 1.5 metre (five foot) long motorboat to buzz groups of pelicans in a reservoir near Beit Alfa, sending the birds spiralling into the sky.

Nitzan Nadan, who manages the Gilboa Fish cooperative, said he spends around 600,000 shekels (\$172,000) a year on measures including vehicle-mounted loudspeakers and firing blank rifle rounds.



Great white pelicans at a reservoir in Mishmar HaSharon, north of the Israeli city of Tel Aviv

At night, projectors and [laser beams](#) are used to keep the birds away.

"The pelicans have to eat and eat in our pools," he said. "They cause damage you can't even begin to estimate."

Ecological causes

In the past [pelican](#) sightings close to Israeli fish pools were rare, but more have come because of ecological problems elsewhere, say experts.

Marshlands and lakes in nearby Turkey, Lebanon and Syria have dried out in recent decades, and even Israeli fishing pools have diminished in number for economic reasons, said Amit Dolev, chief ecologist of the northern district of Israel's Nature and Parks Authority.

"This means that the remaining (water bodies) are nearly the only spots available," he said.

What makes things worse for Israel is the fact that shooting the birds is accepted in neighbouring countries, causing the pelicans to avoid pit stops there.

"Israel is something of an island of nature preservation in the Middle East in many aspects, including this one," Dolev said.



Thousands of migratory pelicans pass through Israel on their way from Europe to Africa and back

To Dolev, broader global cooperation in monitoring the pelicans could help find a solution that would aid the struggling Israeli farmers.

"The issue is certainly global," he said, noting the pelicans' Balkan origins and African destination. "We're basically dealing with it on our own."

The fish farmers said they received no regular help from the state in footing the expenses of the alternative feedings and deterrents.

"We expect help from the world, from Europe, to finance the high costs," Sharir said.

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