

PRBO Conservation Science
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Press Release August 5, 2008

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Farallon Islands See Record High Numbers of Brown Pelicans

The large iconic Brown Pelican, now returning to Northern California, is present in record high numbers at the Farallon Islands this year. As the flocks stream into coastal estuaries to feed and roost, PRBO Conservation Science biologists at the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge recorded a new peak of abundance for this endangered species. Russ Bradley of PRBO, which has steadily monitored Farallon wildlife since 1968, reported a census total on July 17 of 5,856 pelicans on Southeast Farallon Island, a new peak.

Says Bradley, “Only in 1984 were there counts over 5000 on the island. The birds have now covered the marine terrace and are roosting in huge numbers in many other areas of the island as well. This number may increase, as pelican abundance usually peaks in the fall.” PRBO’s unbroken long-term data set from the Farallones spans the Brown Pelican’s zig-zag increase, with their yearly peak number rising overall from a low 40 years ago of 363 birds.

Brown Pelicans are recovering from a crash some 50 years ago, the result of DDT and DDE concentrations that caused eggshell thinning. While Atlantic brown pelicans were removed from the federal endangered species list in 1985, Gulf Coast and California populations are listed still. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering “de-listing” the species throughout its range; the Brown Pelican’s worldwide population is estimated at 650,000 with some 400,000 in Peru.

Dan Anderson, Ph.D., a pelican specialist on the faculty at U.C. Davis comments, “Pelicans now congregating in the Gulf of the Farallones can arrive from any Pacific coast/Gulf of California breeding colony, but the majority likely belong to the Southern California Bight population (i.e., Channel Islands and northwestern Baja), where this year was a good but not great breeding year. Along with hatching-year birds, we’re seeing a high proportion of birds born one and two years ago, pointing to good survival rates of late.”

A photo-illustrated PRBO blog from Southeast Farallon Island, featuring recent sightings, also recalls conditions for pelicans and other island wildlife in 1968: see losfarallones.blogspot.com/.

Boilerplate

PRBO Conservation Science, founded as Point Reyes Bird Observatory, 1963, conserves birds and their ecosystems through innovative scientific research and outreach. Our projects use birds as indicators of ecosystem health, tracking environmental conditions from Alaska to Antarctica, on land and at sea. Visit PRBO on the web at www.prbo.org.