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Thomas Jefferson, one of our more inquisitive presidents, wanted samples for his biology collection. There was no thought of endangered species in 1805.

In Pacific and Clatsop counties, it was a century or two later before the large avians were noticed. Prior to recent warming trends, the pelicans had disappeared from the Northwest landscape.

Now the American white pelicans are here, for maybe the last eight or 10 years. They fly north, mostly in the summers. Graceful, they swoop and dive, twisting and turning on top of waves or passing overhead in flocks, much like the Canada goose with their V-shaped formations.

They tend to fly in even lines, low over the Pacific Ocean or the waters of Willapa Bay, fishing of course, hunting finned prey. But then, their diving hardly appears graceful. These pelicans seem to fall out of the sky.

A small population winters over in Eastern Washington. That warmer climate and accessibility to food has turned the northern lands into a pleasant holdover for one of the largest of North American birds. Indeed, their size eclipses the bald eagle. Of course, the eagle has its own story.

As a kid in the 1950s and 1960s, bald Eagles were rare. Pesticide use had softened their egg shells and endangered the mighty raptor. The symbol of the American West was passing away faster than morning fog that clings to our ocean-front beaches, disappearing as the heat of day overrides the colder coastal air.

The bald Eagle has since become far more common. But in Washington, the American white pelican is still endangered. Certainly, they are rare. I remember seeing my first only a few years ago, as I drove over Youngs Bay, traveling south. I was thrilled at the sight, but little did I imagine that these birds were a moniker of changing times.

On this morning's news, the

frequent stories of a changing climate. Wildfires in California, and even in the Northwest, have brought drought to over a third of the country. Perhaps the pelicans will have the last laugh.

Other than during mating season, their range is predominantly over water. Plowing out a two-foot radius bowl in softer sands or loose gravel with their impressive beaks, they lay two eggs before engaging in a 60 to 70 day incubation.

A gregarious bird, the pelican often travels and forages in a large flock, sometimes traveling long distances in a V-formation. Pelicans lower their bills and flap their wings to drive fish toward shore, corralling small fish. Their nesting is frequently endangered by four-legged predators: bald eagles, large owls and by their own young, who fight lethally with their siblings.

Venture into the peninsula's Willapa National Wildlife Refuge to spot these large birds. Here they come, gliding effortlessly just a few feet above the water, curling in accordance with the shape of the waves – or diving for dinner. Graceful, large and a pleasure to the eye, these white bodied fishers please the birder in all of us. How lucky we are to be here at land's end.

A young bald eagle sits atop a hollow tree trunk.

Andy Cameron



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