

The Pier Baithouse and Brown Pelican Relationship

We, the management and owners of The Pier Baithouse, have always done our best to promote the welfare of the local brown pelican population. Just as we take it as our duty to inform our bait customers about fishing in a way that conserves the fish population and the local environment, we want to foster a respect for the wildlife that surrounds us. Of course we receive a portion of our revenue by providing the opportunity to feed the pelicans. But we see that as one more reason to concern ourselves with the health of the local flock.

Pelicans are fishers. Their food consists of small fish that school locally such as greenbacks or herring which they can swallow whole, head first. A pelican must eat its own weight in fish every day – approximately five to seven pounds. If that amount of food cannot be easily found to be swimming in the local waters then the pelican will attempt to fill out the balance by stealing or begging from people who are fishing from docks or piers. Commercial fishing boats that are throwing out their scrap and waste are a significant temptation to these birds. The interaction of pelicans and fishermen carries a potential for injury or distress to the birds mainly in two ways: contact with fishing tackle in the form of hooks and line or the attempted swallowing of fish scrap that is unsuitable.

Fishing tackle injuries are the most common form of pelican distress and injury that we see here at The Pier. The birds will dive on a catch as it is reeled in and either become entangled in line or impaled by a hook. Most hook injuries we see result in pouch tears. We remove the hook or lure, wash the site and then keep an eye on that particular bird and feed it for a few days to reduce the chance of that pelican aggravating the pouch tear by fishing. Entanglements vary from simple to severe. Untreated, the birds may lose limbs or develop life-threatening wounds from repetitive abrasion of the line. Bird injuries that are beyond our abilities, those needing sutures or care for critical injuries, we refer and arrange transport to The Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary. Over the years we have aided hundreds of birds and done our best to use each of these incidents as an opportunity to inform and educate The Pier visitors that will inevitably gather to watch a rescue.

Pelican feeding on waste from fishing is less of a problem at The St. Petersburg Pier. Generally this occurs in its worst form around commercial fishing operations. Fish scraps are not a natural part of a pelican diet. Often they contain large chunks of bony matter which they cannot ingest smoothly and may cause injury. We advise the fishing public of this threat and encourage responsible disposal of the type of waste that can be a threat.

It is an arguable point that the protected feeding that we offer lowers the injury rate at the pier by keeping away the temptation for the pelicans to involve themselves with people fishing.

We have seen instances of pelican collisions with the pier structure or cars. Malicious behavior towards the birds is rare but we are sad to say that we have seen the results.

Some years ago when the Brown Pelican population had not regained today's numbers we participated in "The winter feeding of the pelicans." The feeding was sponsored and supported by a local environmental group to see the birds through the winter months when food is less plentiful.

We invite you to come and visit us and observe the Brown Pelicans of the Gulf Coast. Forty years ago, their extinction was a real possibility. Today the population thrives.