

The Life and Times of a Brown Pelican

By Victoria Hotz

Our story starts on a little island off the coast of California. You humans refer to it as "Alcatraz," but we pelicans call it hiss head-wobble wing-flap, which translates roughly as "small place we fly to." It was mating season, and all the pelicans old enough to partake were rushing hither and thither. Plumage was bright, and excitement was high. One such pelican was head-twirl, or "Hete." Now Hete was a male, and being such, he was looking for the perfect nesting spot. Somewhere easily accessible, yet hard to find, close to a food source, but far enough away to discourage gulls, with a great view, yet sheltered from the worst of the sun's rays. He sighed. This was going to be a long day. Hete searched and searched, and just before the last light was gone from the earth, he found it. The ideal nesting spot, perfect on all accounts. It was an indent in the side of the cliff, high up on the island's peak. He settled down to sleep. Tomorrow, the laborious task of finding a mate would begin.

Hete awoke as the sun rose over the land. He ruffled his feathers, preened, and began the intense courting ritual, which would be extremely boring to relate. Suffice it to say that by the end of the day, Hete had a companion, head-swivel hop, or "Hesha." In two weeks, Hete and Hesha had a reasonably sturdy nest. Soon after, Hesha laid three eggs, each a day apart. During the next thirty days, Hete and Hesha kept the eggs warm with their feet, and the sun from frying the eggs with their wings. On the thirty-first day, one of the eggs moved. Slowly, the eggs hatched one at a time. After three days, all three chicks had hatched, and the next phase of their life began.

Over the next ten weeks, the chicks grew stronger and bigger. They molted their white fuzz and grew the feathers of a juvenile pelican. Soon, ten weeks after hatching, the chicks were flying. They were ready to leave the nest. One left each day. The first to go was head-twitch, or "Hetch." The next day, his sister head-flick, or "Hefik," left. The last one to leave was head-bobble, or "Hebb." After all three chicks were gone, Hesha sighed. She missed them, but she knew she would have more next year.

Hetch flew over the water surrounding Alcatraz, looking for some fish. His father Hete had described how to fish to him and his nestmates many times, but he had never done it before. Suddenly, he spotted a flicker in the water. He flapped his wings and rose thirty feet above the water. He folded his wings and dived. He hit the water with a splash and opened his beak. "Fishguts!" he exclaimed. He had completely missed.

As it turned out, Hetch did not catch any fish that day, or the next. Finally, on the third day, he snagged a menhaden (a type of fish pelicans frequently eat). Day turned into night, week turned into month, and Hetch became quite adept at catching fish. He was still not as good as his father, Hete, but he usually caught something everyday.

After awhile, he started to molt again. Hetch was now an adult. The next breeding season, he too searched for a nesting spot. And just like his father before him, and his father before that, Hetch raised chicks with his mate.

Hetch's sister Hefik also had a hard time catching fish. But unlike Hetch, she made her way to a pier. Fishermen would catch fish, and she would try to steal them. Sometimes she succeeded. But one fateful day, she grabbed a fish too early, and the fishhook was stuck in her upper mandible. She became entangled in the fishing string. Hefik was scared. Her beak felt like it was going to falloff, and she could not fly. The fisherman noticed her plight, and brought her to a marine animal rescue center. The hook was removed from her mouth, and a cold metal band was

painlessly placed around one leg. Unknowingly, Hefik had been saved from death. She also had been banded, a technique that scientists use to learn more about the lifespan, habits, and migration of birds.

Hefik never returned to a pier, and in time, she too learned how to fish. And, just like Hetch, she molted, found a mate, and raised chicks.

Hebb was not so lucky. He was the last chick in the nest, and therefore the smallest and weakest. He too tried to learn how to fish. But unlike Hetch and Hefik, he could not manage to catch a single fish. And because he was undernourished as a chick, Hebb wasted away, and was seen no more. Thus it was that two of the three chicks made their way in the pelican world.

Works Consulted

Wonders of the Pelican World, by Joseph J. Cook and Ralph W. Schreiber
Pelicans, by Dorothy Hinshaw Patent