

Tim Herd's

# Watchable Wildlife Guide

wildlife observation in the right place at the right time

Week of Dec. 10-16, 2006

## Peerless plunger

Like a competitive Olympic diver, the brown pelican half-folds its wings and plunges into the water in a flawless twisting header from 30 feet. Netting a fish in its pouch, it then buoyantly rises to the surface, courtesy of air pockets in its bones and beneath its skin.

The spectacular diver's signature trait is its large pouch: the 3-gallon capacity is two to three times what its stomach can hold. As it surfaces, it quickly strains water from the corners of its mouth, stranding the fish inside. If it isn't positioned quite right for gulping down immediately, the bird may flip it into the air to swallow it head-first, but then takes its chances with the ever-present, thieving gulls. The brazen swindlers will even alight on the diver's head, awaiting a chance to snatch the fresh catch!

The bicoastal pelican spends its nonbreeding wintertime congregating on sand spits and offshore sand bars and islets. Watch for small flocks cruising the coastline in low, single-file lines, with the flyers' necks folded against their shoulders.



Photo by Jason Hahn www.jasonhahn.com

### WHERE TO OBSERVE

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Ala.  
Laguna de San Ignacio, Baja Calif., Mexico  
Ano Nuevo State Reserve, Calif.  
Point Reyes National Seashore, Calif.  
Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuge, Fla.  
Merritt Island NWR, Fla.  
Pelican Island NWR, Fla.  
Grand Isle State Park, La.  
Pea Island NWR, N.C.  
Cape Romain NWR, S.C.  
Laguna Atacosta NWR, Texas  
Back Bay NWR, Va.

### LOOK FOR

#### field marks:

large, gray-brown water bird  
massive dark bill  
and large pouch  
white head and neck

#### habits:

twisting plunge-dives into  
the water  
graceful flap-and-glide  
flight, often in lines  
groups resting on sand spits  
and offshore bars

### Brown pelican

*Pelecanus occidentalis*

42-54 inches; wingspan: 65-84 inches

**Habitat:** mangroves, coastal bays, lagoons, estuaries

