

Unusual feeding behaviour of a juvenile Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis* on Aruba

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En dos oportunidades, en agosto de 1997, juveniles de *Pelecanus occidentalis* fueron observados alimentándose en una zona de aguas someras recrecida de juncos, *Typha dominicensis*, en la laguna de Barbeli, Aruba. En ambos casos los juveniles parecían espiar el fondo del agua. El primero, mientras nadaba entre la vegetación, submergió el pico hasta de nivel de los ojos varias veces para buscar entre las bases de los juncos, y luego subió el pico y se tragó lo que había encontrado. El segundo, observado dos días después, nadaba en aguas abiertas y parecía estar pescando alevines. Este método de alimentación, de submergir el pico mientras nada, se conoce del *P. erythrorhynchos*, pero no del *P. occidentalis*. Los juveniles mostraron gran habilidad en este comportamiento, mientras que un adulto, que aparentemente trató de imitar al segundo juvenil, no logró hacerlo con la misma eficiencia y terminó por agredir al juvenil. La cantidad de tiempo que las aves dedicaron a forrajear mediante el comportamiento descrito parece indicar que este no es incidental sino una habilidad bien desarrollada.

In August 1997, I visited the Barbeli wetland, Aruba, Netherlands Antilles. The water was cloudy and appeared to hold a quantity of suspended sediment. Visibility within the water was c.20 cm. I noticed a juvenile Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis* feeding in an unusual way: paddling along the edge of some *Typha domingensis* bulrushes, it would pause every couple of metres or so and thrust its head into the water to about eye-level, apparently probing at the base of the bulrushes. It would soon raise its head from the water, keeping the bill pointing down while the water drained from it. It would then raise the bill and with a few shakes, gulp down its prey. The prey appeared dark through the pouch's translucent skin and about the size of a large snail. The bird was watched on-and-off for c.20 minutes during which time it continued feeding in the same manner.

The incident was mentioned to Dr Betty Ann Schreiber, who commented that while 'dipping' has been recorded for American White Pelican *P. erythrorhynchos*, it has not been commonly reported for Brown Pelican. Dr Ann Sutton reported that she had seen Brown Pelican foraging in open shallow water in Jamaica. As White Pelican has not been recorded in this part of the Caribbean, it was considered to be an aberrant behaviour of Brown Pelican.



A couple of days later, Dr Schreiber and myself observed a young Brown Pelican feeding in the Barbeli wetland. This time it was in the middle of a waterway and was fishing by peering into the water and dipping as it paddled. On this occasion, the dipping took the form of a more vigorous jab, and the bird almost always appeared successful in catching one or more small, minnow-sized fish.

Following the juvenile at a few metres distance was an adult Brown Pelican, which was emulating its behaviour with less skill and at a slower frequency. In six jabbing dips it was only successful on the sixth attempt. The adult moved closer to the juvenile, but catching nothing in a few tries, it then surged at the young bird, raising its wings in a threatening manner. The young pelican was barely disturbed and easily moved out of reach. The adult stabbed into the water where the young bird had been, failed to catch anything, then turned away and paddled off in the direction of open water. The juvenile continued dipping and catching prey at every attempt. I watched the adult subsequently, but did not see it attempt to dip again.

Another adult Brown Pelican was paddling along the edge of the bulrushes, but did not dip even once. It is possible that the young pelican had learned the habit of dipping for food by emulating ducks or waders. That it was not a chance behaviour, but a developed skill is evident from the amount of time feeding was observed in this way on two separate occasions.

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