Pelicans

Pelicans are large, robust birds that feed on fish and crustaceans. Hanging under their long, flat
bill is a voluminous, fleshy throat pouch, which
is inflated only when the pelican is underwater
snatching prey. Contrary to popular opinion,
the pelican's pouch is not used to carry or store
fish. It serves as a scoop to separate the fish
from the water. When deflated, the pouch is flat
and not noticeable.

Populations of Brown pelicans, *Pelicanus
occidentalis*, were nearly obliterated due to
insecticides (such as DDT), which accumulate in
the fish the pelicans eat. The insecticide caused
the pelican's eggs to be thin-shelled or broken,
and young pelicans died before hatching.
Fortunately, the Brown pelican population is
now recovering.

Brown pelicans have a wingspan of about six
and a half feet. They are strictly coastal and are
found from the North Carolina to Florida and
the Gulf of Mexico. When searching for fish,
pelicans cruise close to the water, gliding for
long distances with only an occasional flap of
their wings. Once they spot food, the Brown
pelicans ascend into the air and drop straight
down head first into the water, producing a
large splash. Usually they feed on fish that
school near the surface, such as mullet, herring,
and menhaden. Frigate birds, terns, and gulls
continuously harass the pelicans and try to steal
their food. Pelicans nest in trees or on the
ground of small islands in shallow bay areas.
Any human disturbance of the nesting site
during breeding is very detrimental to
successful hatching.

White pelicans, *Pelicanus erythrorhynchos*, have
an incredible nine-foot wingspan. They breed
along the West coast and in the central United
States near lakes, marshes, and beaches. In the
winter they migrate to the Everglades and
Florida Keys. Unlike the Brown pelicans, the
White pelican scoops up fish while swimming
rather then by dive bombing in from the sky.