

American White Pelicans

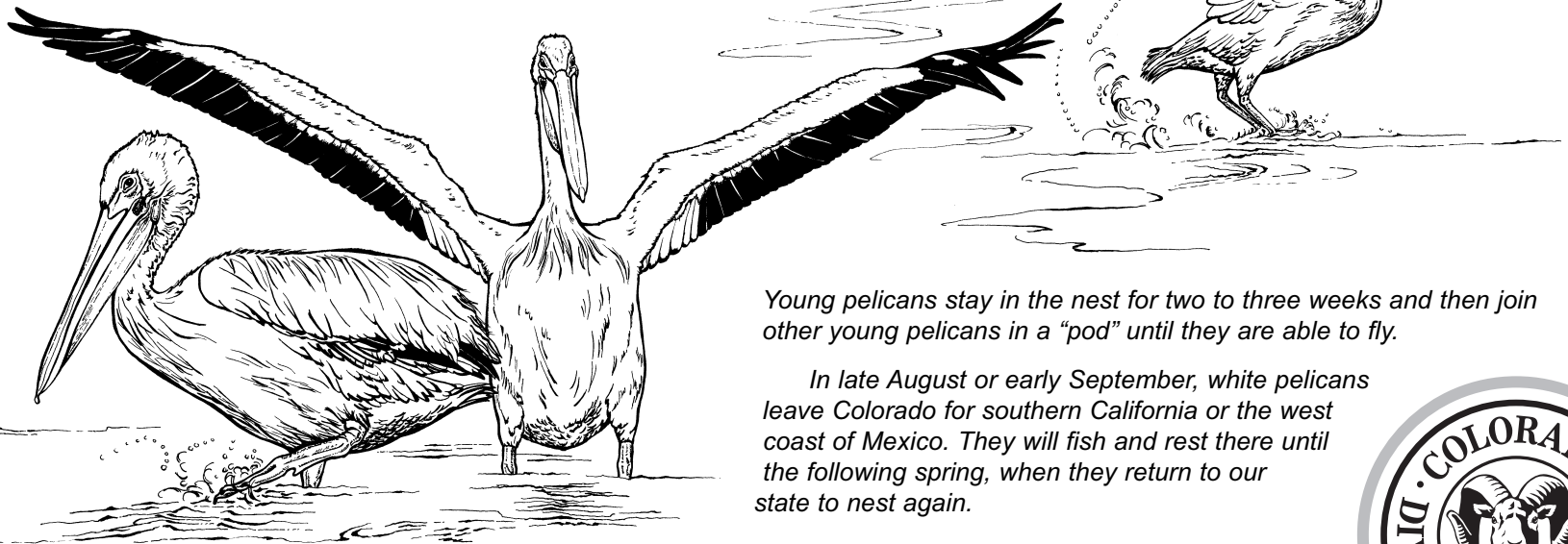
The American white pelican is a huge white bird with black wing tips and a nine-foot wingspan. Large flocks migrate into Colorado each spring. Pelicans flying in formation are an impressive sight. They glide in circles as they descend onto lakes, rivers, and marshes.

White pelicans fish in cooperative groups. They form a line or half circle and drive fish into shallow water by beating their wings on the surface. When the fish are trapped in the shallows, the pelicans simply scoop them up in their pouched bills. Pelicans can hold as much as three gallons of water in their bill. As soon as they scoop up the fish, they tilt their heads back to drain out the water and then swallow the fish. Young pelicans feed by sticking their bills into their parents' throats to retrieve food.

Pelicans are very social and breed in large, dense colonies. There are a few pelican colonies in Colorado. Although they like to be with each other, breeding pelicans are extremely sensitive to human disturbance. They usually choose isolated islands in lakes and rivers.

White pelicans begin to court and find a mate as soon as they arrive at the colony. The pair will build a nest together by making a shallow depression on the bare ground. They will put a low rim of gravel, soil, or plants around the nest and sometimes line it with dried plants. Pelicans usually lay two large, chalky-white eggs. Both parents incubate the eggs using their feet!

When the pelican chicks hatch, they are blind, bare, and helpless. At 10 days old they are covered with thick white down. They eat by digging digested food out of the adult's pouch. The older, larger chick almost always wins out in the struggle with the younger, smaller bird for food. Often, the younger chick dies.



Young pelicans stay in the nest for two to three weeks and then join other young pelicans in a "pod" until they are able to fly.

In late August or early September, white pelicans leave Colorado for southern California or the west coast of Mexico. They will fish and rest there until the following spring, when they return to our state to nest again.

