

Pelicans return to a Great Salt Lake island for the first time in decades

The birds left Gunnison Island last year after land bridges left them vulnerable to predators. They returned again this spring.

By SOFIA JEREMIAS

Each spring, American white pelicans flock to Gunnison Island in the north arm of the Great Salt Lake to nest and raise their young.

Even if they were allowed to, the rocky outcropping isn't the kind of island where a human might want to lay out a beach towel. But it used to be the perfect place for pelicans to raise their young.

"It's a pretty inhospitable place," said Great Salt Lake Ecosystem Program Manager John Luft. "It is brutally hot, there is no fresh water." Despite the harsh conditions, birds made their nests there because of the island's isolation, protection from predators and plentiful food sources from nearby wetlands.

Two times each year the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources flies planes over the islands to count the populations. In the summer, researchers travel to the island to place bands on the pelicans to track them after they leave. "I always think how rough it is on these poor birds that are on this island all day long in the heat and there's no trees for shade," Luft said. "There's nothing. So it's a really difficult place to nest."

The continental population of pelicans is doing fairly well and rebounded since the 1970s. Pelicans are considered "low concern" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.

Then the Great Salt Lake started shrinking. Today, neither Gunnison nor Hat islands are true islands or isolated habitats. Predators like coyotes can reach the islands by crossing land bridges that formed as lake levels decreased.

Pelicans nesting population declined each year from an average of 4,290 nests and 8,580 breeding adults to a low of 2,900 nests and 5,800 breeding adults in 2023.

Although thousands of pelicans began their nesting season on Gunnison in 2023, DNR believes that predators visited the island multiple times last year.

When the DNR flew a plane over Gunnison Island to count the population in late June, all the pelicans were gone.



Top » American white pelicans fly alongside black-necked stilts at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge on June 23, 2021. Above » Gunnison Island in the northwest end of the Great Salt Lake is home to a large breeding colony of American white pelicans, which are drawn here because of its isolation. But dropping lake levels have enabled coyotes to access the island. Utah researchers are using cameras to monitor the nesting birds and would be predators this spring.

BRIAN MAFFLY, INSET BY FRANCISCO KJOLSETH — The Salt Lake Tribune

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JOHN LUFT
Great Salt Lake Ecosystem
Program Manager

"Unfortunately, they abandoned eggs, chicks, everything," Luft said.

The lake's level remains low, but the pelicans returned to Gunnison Island this spring. Utah researchers were surprised when they spotted the birds nesting on Hat Island too. It hasn't been an island for more than twenty years and there's been no record of pelicans nesting there in more than

80 years.

The large birds can live for more than 20 years, and their return to Hat Island exceeds the current population's living memory.

"Hopefully they're successful," Luft said. But with the land bridges intact, coyotes can access both islands this summer. The Great Salt Lake would have to rise another two or three feet for water to once again

cover the land bridges to Gunnison Island, according to Luft.

"At least this year it doubles our chances," Luft said. Two islands are a little better for the pelicans than one and he's hopeful that some of the roughly 800 pelicans on Gunnison Island and 1,300 on Hat Island will nest in peace before their fledglings seek warmer ground.

The Utah Department of Natural Resources owns Gunnison and Hat islands — two places that pelicans historically nested before migrating to California or Texas.

Humans aren't allowed to visit the pelicans on either of the islands, but they can check in on the nesting populations this spring remotely by checking out the PELICam at, https://home.chpc.utah.edu/~u0553130/Camera_Display.phtml.

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