

Pelicans are large bulky birds with an enormous bill and gular (throat) pouch. Short legs make them ungainly on land, but they swim gracefully. Fly strongly with head tucked in, often in a flock in V formation, or soar high on thermals. They feed mainly on fish scooped from the water, often feeding in a group to surround a shoal of fish. Favour large open waterbodies.

**AUSTRALIAN PELICAN** *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

Rare Australian vagrant

170 cm, 5 kg. *Enormous white bird with huge pink bill and pouch; upperwing black with a large white panel; underwing white with black primaries. Juvenile brown where adult black. Habitat:* Occasionally recorded in freshwater and tidal wetlands in NZ. [Sp 87]



**PELICANS**

**Pelecanidae**

7 species; 1 vagrant reaches New Zealand.

Pelicans are very large freshwater or marine birds with four webbed toes and a very long bill with a massive fleshy pouch for catching fish. Small flocks surround a shoal of fish and then feed synchronously by dipping their heads into the centre of the shoal. Unlike some

marine pelicans, the Australasian species rarely dives for food. Pelicans have a laboured take-off, but their flight is easy and graceful as they soar on thermals and glide effortlessly, reminiscent of a jumbo jet, as they come in to land. They often fly in flocks in a V formation, roost in flocks and breed in colonies.

**87. AUSTRALIAN PELICAN** *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

Plate 27

**Size:** 170 cm, 5 kg  
**Distribution:** Breed only in Australia, mainly in the north and east. Usually found on inland and coastal lakes rather than in harbours or estuaries, and often breed near inland lakes, although some colonies are on islands in Bass Strait. They disperse widely from their breeding colonies and are regular visitors to New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago and Solomon Islands. Rare vagrant to New Zealand with four records: Whanganui River (1890), Kaipara Harbour (August 1976), Southland (November 1977), three or four

birds in South Canterbury (December 1977–June 1978). When the 1977 birds came, there was a simultaneous influx into New Guinea and some reached as far as Palau.  
**Behaviour:** Australian Pelicans are gregarious, breeding in colonies, roosting in flocks on sand or mud banks, feeding in parties to surround shoals of fish and then plunging their heads simultaneously below the water to catch their prey.

**Reading:** Vestjens, W.J.M. 1977. *Aust Wildl Res* 4: 37–58.