

## W I L D L I F E

# Pelican Dreams

California brown pelicans have not done as well as expected since being removed from the U.S. Endangered Species List in 2009, says marine ornithologist Dan Anderson. This year Anderson reported a breeding failure in Mexico's Gulf of California where 90 percent of pelicans breed. He says a warm water cell brought August-like conditions in April and the pelicans headed north to search of food about six weeks early.

Anderson is one of the scientists in Judy Irving's *Pelican Dreams*, a documentary that premieres at San Francisco's Balboa Theatre on October 24, 2014. Irving had already begun to shoot pelicans before making her award-winning film, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, but didn't have a storyline until a juvenile pelican landed on the roadway of the Golden Gate Bridge and didn't budge until it was removed by security. *Pelican Dreams* follows the rescue, rehabilitation, and release of that pelican, which Irving calls Gigi.

Gigi is cared for at the International Bird Rescue in Fairfield, California. As she swims in the pelican pool, we learn more about pelicans and how they end up there. Many of the adults (those with white and yellow heads) and juveniles (brown heads) are there as a result of injuries caused by fishhooks and fishing line. Some of the juveniles, like Gigi, are malnourished due to a lack of food. It's hard to fish if you're a pelican.

Irving knew from the start that she wanted to capture their athletic feeding dive, the height of which is determined by the depth of the baitfish the pelican is after. In the film a juvenile pelican copies an adult's practiced dive with its aerial half twist, nosedive, and last-minute wing tuck. After slicing into the water they both open their massive two-gallon sized pouches, but the mature pelican gets a fish while the juvenile does not.

In the film, we follow Irving to the Channel Islands, the only place in the United States that California brown pelicans breed today. On the steep and cacti dotted slopes of Santa Barbara Island, Irving shows us mating birds with pouches that blush and eyes that change color from brown to blue. Next

we go to Baja California where Dan Anderson counts breeding pelicans each spring. We also learn how DDT nearly wiped out this ancient species until it was banned and the bird listed as endangered in 1970.

Irving's film about pelicans is more meditative than scientific, more ode than ornithological profile. It's dream-like quality can be traced to a "magical and mysterious" close encounter that Irving had with a pelican in 1998 while filming in a thick fog above Rodeo Lagoon, she says.

Pelicans seen in the Bay Area are either roosting or stopping for a snack



while migrating in their non-breeding range from central Mexico to Vancouver, Canada. Anderson says there's no reason to worry about the population of pelicans at this stage. Low breeding numbers are consistent during

El Niño events, though this year was different. "Birds from sooty shearwaters in New Zealand to pelicans in the Gulf of California showed El Niño-like affects ahead of when El Niño was predicted to set in," he says.

In addition to the film, Irving is producing clips and additional shorts for use in museums, nature centers and education with a grant from the Coastal Conservancy. **AG**

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## WATER FRONT

### Wooden Ways Weather Well

On May 31st of 2014, the sailing yacht *Freda* trawled the shallows of the Richardson Bay and then returned to dock. While such a minor voyage may not sound like cause for fanfare, hundreds gathered to watch. The event's significance did not lie in modern grandeur, but rather in living history.

*Freda* was built in Tiburon in the late 19th century by a barkeep with a passion for sailing. Her return to the water makes her the oldest active vessel of her kind on the west coast, and was only possible because of an exhaustive restoration effort that began after she sank in 2004.

Wooden boats like *Freda* are becoming a rarity on the San Francisco Bay. Fortunately, places such as the Spaulding Wooden Boat Center in Sausalito, which spearheaded the restoration, are hard at work preserving the area's longtime association with wooden boat design.

The center's namesake, Myron Spaulding, was an icon in the sailing world. As a foster child, he was compelled to put bread on the table while also pursuing his love of the water.

Trained to play the violin from a young age, Spaulding provided for his family the only way he knew how: Working as a concert violinist.

He might have been a professional musician, but it was through nautical artistry that Myron left his impression. He built his first boat in a high school woodworking class, and, in the 1950s, purchased the land where the Spaulding Center now resides.

Spaulding excelled at building boats suited for the unique conditions of the San Francisco Bay. Some of his original boat designs, such as the Spaulding 33, can still be seen out on the water.

After his death, Spaulding's widow Gladys turned the boatworks over in trust to become a nonprofit dedicated to preserving not only wooden boats, but also the relevant skillsets necessary to build and maintain them. Run mostly by volunteers, the Center leads youth boat building programs and works to instill Myron Spaulding's passion in future generations.

Today, demand for hand-crafted wooden sailboats is on the decline. However, the Spaulding Center remains a bastion of local tradition, ensuring that boats like *Freda* remain the pride of the San Francisco Bay. **MHA**

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