

Florida Ornithological Society

Position Statement on Fishing Gear and Bird Protection

The Florida Ornithological Society is concerned about the impacts of fishing gear on birds in the state, especially Brown Pelicans. It is well-known that Florida offers spectacular fishing opportunities. Fish-eating birds also flourish, taking advantage of the abundant baitfish populations in Gulf, Atlantic, estuary, and freshwater habitats. The overlap of waterbirds and fishermen, using the same regions and habitats, often leads to conflict, resulting in significant detriment to birds, especially Brown Pelicans.

Wildlife-sensitive fishing practices, if adopted by fishermen state-wide, can significantly reduce injury and mortality for birds.

It has long been known that fishing gear entanglement causes significant problems for individual Brown Pelicans, to the point of affecting regional populations (Schreiber and Mock 1988). In 1980, Schreiber reported that over 700 adult and immature Brown Pelicans were being killed due to entanglement each year, in Florida alone. In addition, inspection of individual birds revealed that 80% of live birds showed signs of past physical impacts of fishing gear entanglement (Schreiber 1975). Rehabilitators found that hundreds of pelicans were being treated for injuries from hooks and fishing line (Mackey 1982). Hooks were seen to tear pelican's pouches, impairing ability to forage, and causing starvation. Entanglement in line sometimes causes inability to fly or swim due to wrapping of the wings and legs, which will result in death. Line becoming tightly wrapped around extremities can result in infection and necrosis that can also lead to death (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2009). "Entanglement in sport-fishing gear is a major cause of mortality in the southeast U.S." (Schreiber and Mock 1988).

Today, the destruction that fishing gear and fishing practices on pelicans individually and regionally on their populations continues. "Abandoned fishing line . . . threatens this species along with many other marine animals. It has been estimated that more than 700 adult and immature pelicans die each year in Florida alone from entanglement in sport-fishing gear." (Shields 2021). Studies conducted by the State Park staff, volunteers from Tampa and St. Petersburg Audubon Societies, and Friends of the Pelicans, Inc. on the Sunshine Skyway Fishing Pier State Park and at the Ft. DeSoto Fishing Pier revealed that this figure significantly underestimates the actual numbers of birds being injured and killed by fishing gear (unpublished data). Cosgrove (2017) reported that with education to fishermen on the Naples Pier, impacts to pelicans was significantly reduced.

Another unfortunate fishing practice which results in significant injuries and deaths for Brown Pelicans and other birds is the feeding of the filleted carcass bones and offal of larger fish by fishermen. While this traditional post-fishing trip practice appears to benefit the pelicans and birds, the result can be deadly to the birds. Pelicans naturally eat small fish, captured by plunge-diving, and swallowed whole. The bodies of the small-fish prey are dissolved slowly by powerful gastric acids; first the scales, then muscle, and finally softened bones are passed into the intestinal tract, under the natural digestive process, without causing injury.

But the large bones of filleted carcasses, fed to begging birds, often puncture pouches, throats, stomachs, and intestines, causing infection, peritonitis, and a painful death. Bird rehabilitators warn that this is a significant cause of pelican mortality.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has a rule prohibiting feeding pelicans, but the rule's wording interpretation interferes with enforcement. Florida Administrative Code 68A-4.001 states,

“The intentional feeding or the placement of food that attracts pelicans and modifies the natural behavior of pelicans so as to be detrimental to the survival or health of a local population is prohibited.” Since it is not possible to prove that feeding an individual pelican affects a regional population, the rule is unenforceable.

FOS recommends the following actions to reduce the impacts of fishing practices on pelicans and other birds in Florida:

- Educational outreach to fishermen that includes information about how to avoid accidentally catching a pelican or other birds and techniques to safely release a bird if caught, without further injuring it, should be actively provided by the FWC, State Parks, and counties and towns across the state, especially at piers, boat launch sites, and other fishing locations.
- Fishermen and others should never feed pelicans or other waterbirds, as this trains them to come near fishing piers, fishermen in boats, on bridges, and other locations, where they may become entangled in line or hooked by gear.
- Filleted fish carcasses should be discarded where pelicans cannot get them, either in appropriate garbage cans or using carcass chutes which will drop the exposed bones and offal below the top 6 feet of water, in areas with strong tidal flow.
- The FAC 68A-4.001 rule should be amended to make it illegal to feed pelicans and other large waterbirds in Florida.

Some websites and information for fishermen and others who are often outdoors and may encounter a pelican or other bird tangled in line are:

- <https://myfwc.com/wildlife/unhook/?redirect=unhook> or myfwc.com/unhook
- <https://ocean.floridamarine.org/SeabirdRehabilitators/>
- <https://myfwc.com/media/6320/pelican-rescue-brochure.pdf>

Tampa Audubon, St. Petersburg Audubon, and Manatee County Audubon, and videographer Dee Fairbanks Simpson have produced video documentaries about the impacts of fishing gear on pelicans and how to release a bird accidentally entangled. The longer documentary (21 minutes) describes the issue and ways to prevent it: <https://youtu.be/dkcMdpBaZ3s>. The short video (5 minutes) shows how to rescue a pelican: <https://youtu.be/PQU9V1IS8fg>. There is also a playlist which includes both videos and any future added pelican videos https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLw7UG4BcJDK0frdHFIDBxCo_9QH07XLM2.

Fishermen should know the steps for safely releasing an accidentally hooked bird:

- Enlist another person to help you hold the bird while you unhook or disentangle it.
- The rescuer should wear sunglasses or goggles to protect their eyes.
- Secure the head firmly, gently fold the wings against the bird’s body, and hold the feet.
- Gently covering the bird’s eye with a towel or cloth will help calm the bird, making it easier to remove the hook or line.
- Use a wire clipper to cut the barb, and back the hook out of the bird’s flesh. Cut and remove any line.
- Check the wings, legs, and body for additional hooks or line, as many birds have been entangled or hooked before.
- Point the bird’s head towards the water and step back as you release the bird.

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