

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
March 29, 2009

Chautauqua Lake's Honored Guests
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



This photograph, taken through the eyepiece of a telescope from Vukote on Chautauqua Lake, documents one of two American White Pelicans seen on March 25, 2009. (Photograph by Jim Berry.)

Two American White Pelicans made a rare appearance on the open waters of Chautauqua Lake this spring. On the morning of March 25, Roger Tory Peterson Institute president Jim Berry and local ornithology expert Bob Sundell carefully observed the birds from Vukote near the bridge over the canal, on Ashville Bay and up the lake toward Veterans Memorial Bridge. Jim took video footage of the birds as they swam around 500 yards from shore, and several still photos as well, through the eyepiece of his spotting scope. Later in the morning I observed one of them swimming, flying short distances on enormous wings, and even eating a fish, and recorded some of the action in my field journal.

I noticed that a casual observer, without binoculars, might think the white bird way out on the choppy lake was a Tundra Swan, hundreds of which use Chautauqua Lake as a major migration stopover at this time of year. Through binoculars, however, the similarities ended. The pelican's bill was fantastic: bright yellow-orange in the morning sunlight, long and massive. On top of the bill, toward the tip, was an obvious growth like the centerboard on a sailboat, indicating this was a breeding adult.

Brown Pelicans, with which the reader may be more familiar, often fish by hovering and then diving straight down into the water. Not the white pelican; they do not dive but rather dip their head underwater to scoop up fish. I watched it do this – then I could see what that bill was really all about. The lower mandible is equipped with an extensible pouch, which bowed and flapped in the strong breeze, weighted with water and fish before the huge bird tipped his head up to swallow its catch.

The American White Pelican is one of North America's biggest birds with a wingspan that may exceed nine feet. This bird certainly appeared huge, especially in flight, its solid black secondary wing feathers contrasting sharply with the clean white of the rest of its body.

How often does one see an American White Pelican on Chautauqua Lake? According to Sundell's meticulous records there were no Chautauqua Lake records from about 1860 until April 1988 when one was observed off Chautauqua Institution and Prendergast Point. One sighting was recorded in 1989, three in 1992. This year's March 25 sightings were the first since September 1992. When this bird shows up it is indeed an honored guest.

A glance at a range map for this species shows why seeing one on Chautauqua Lake is such a rarity. While its winter range includes most of the Gulf Coast, Mexico and Southern California, its breeding range consists of discontinuous patches of the American and Canadian West, especially the Dakotas, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Their normal migration routes are hundreds of miles west of here.

If you are fortunate enough to live along or to frequent the Chautauqua Lakeshore, you owe it to yourself – and to the science of ornithology, which advances in large part due to the efforts of amateur “citizen scientists” – to become aware and appreciative of its birdlife. Chautauqua Lake is an Audubon-designated Important Bird Area for many good reasons, not the least of which is its crucial role as a waterfowl migration flyway. The more you observe, the better you will be able to tell what is simply wonderful (such as the increasingly common Bald Eagle) from what is extraordinary and notable (such as these rare pelicans). When you see something you think might fit into the latter category call 716-665-2473 and let the staff of RTPI know right away – you may have spotted an honored guest!

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve, and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its annual membership campaign is currently underway. For more information or to support these efforts, please call 664-2166 or go to Chautauquawatershed.org.