

Photo Essay: Hunting Methods and Feeding tactics of Great White Pelican

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Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) is a migrant to Gujarat, seen in large water bodies. It is also regularly seen in Ranmal Lake (Lakhota Lake), Jamnagar where large groups of up to 200 birds are regularly observed in winter months. Observations of hunting methods and feeding behaviour of this bird seen in Ranmal Lake are given below in a series of photographs, rarely documented photographically.

Great White Pelican feeds in a group, known as 'cooperative feeding'. The monsoon rainfall in Jamnagar in 2013 was scanty,

and hence this winter (13-14) the water level in Ranmal lake was low. This provided a chance to these birds to catch large sized fishes from the lake, not possible otherwise when the water depth is more. It was a great opportunity for me to observe the feeding behaviour of pelicans. I concluded after the photography session that Great White Pelicans may be cooperative feeders but many times they attempt to rob the food from their colleagues.



Fig 1: A group of Great White Pelicans in the early morning sunlight.

Fig 2: Pelicans forming a circle and dipping their beaks together, creating a circle of open pouches, thereby trying to trap any fish in the area. A Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax* spp.) intrudes in the circle and tries to catch/steal fish from the besieged waters.

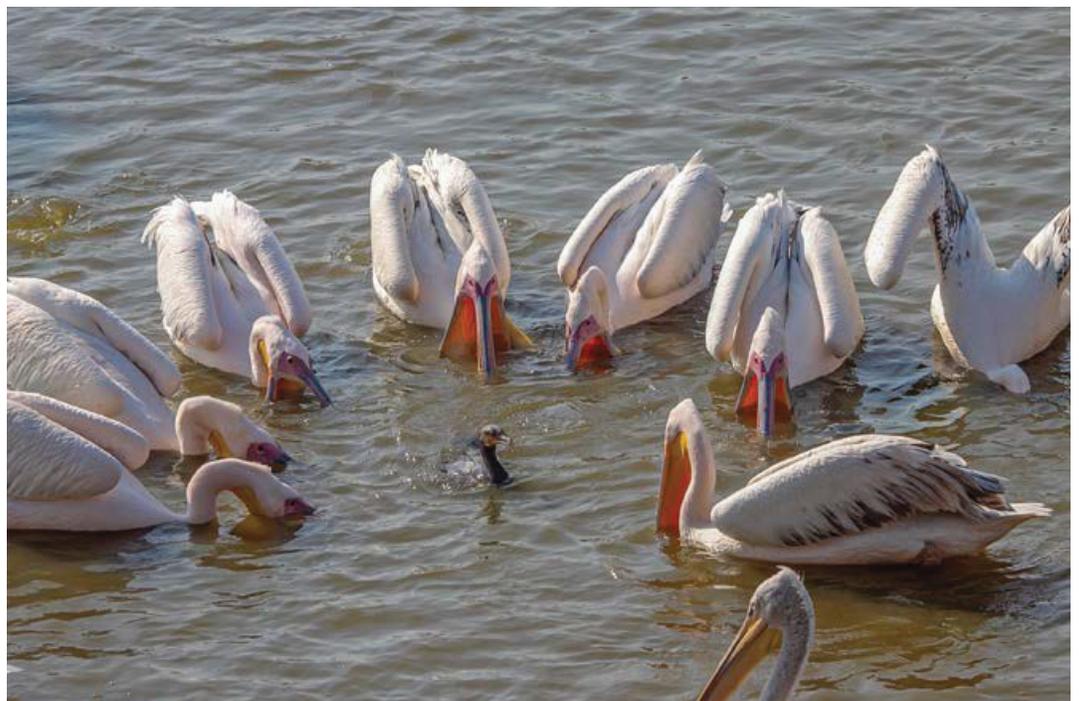


Fig 3: A pelican is successful in catching a large fish, and tries to run away from other birds of the group to avoid food piracy. Other individuals will pursue the lucky bird.



Fig 4: A pelican pulls the pouch with a fish inside and tries to rob the fish. This act stretches the pouch but the possessor closes its beak and tries to prevent the hard earned prey from being robbed. Onlookers waiting expectantly for a possible free meal!



Fig 5: Desperate measures!! Another Pelican becomes even more aggressive and catches the neck of the owner in a desperate attempt to burgle its prey. The Pelican with the fish is equally determined and keeps its beak closed to avoid food piracy. After 15 minutes of trying other individuals give up.



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Fig 6: Pelican alone with a large fish, trying to swallow it.



Fig 7: The fish is quite large and difficult to swallow. The Pelican extends the pouch for almost five minutes to align the fish and position it in such a way that it would be easier to gulp.

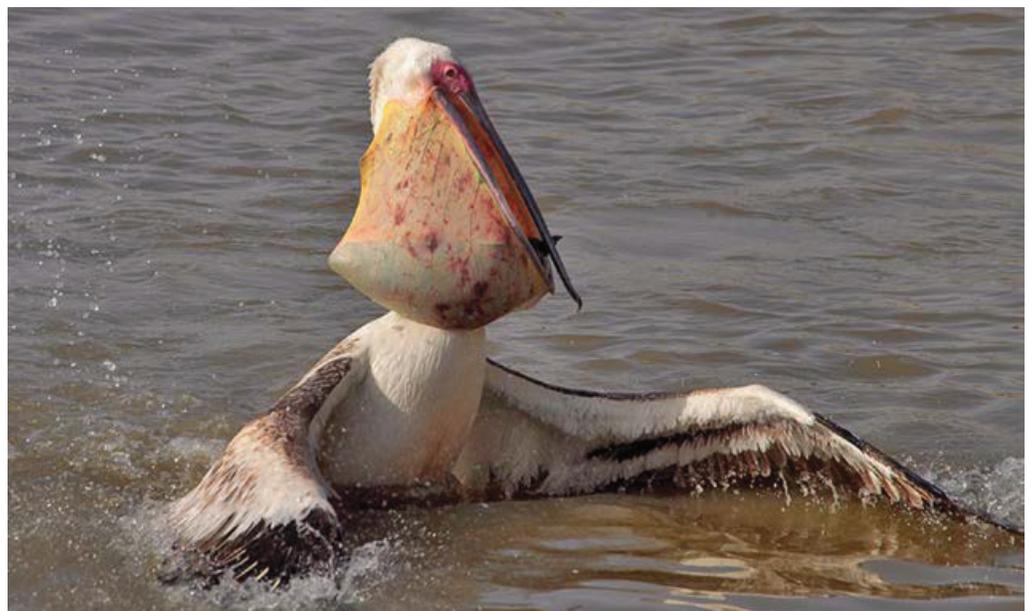


Fig 8: Sometimes more measures are needed. Pelican lowers the pouch and takes little water. The pouch with fish and water will become heavy and get extended. Pelican then flaps its wings to get a good position to guzzle the fish.

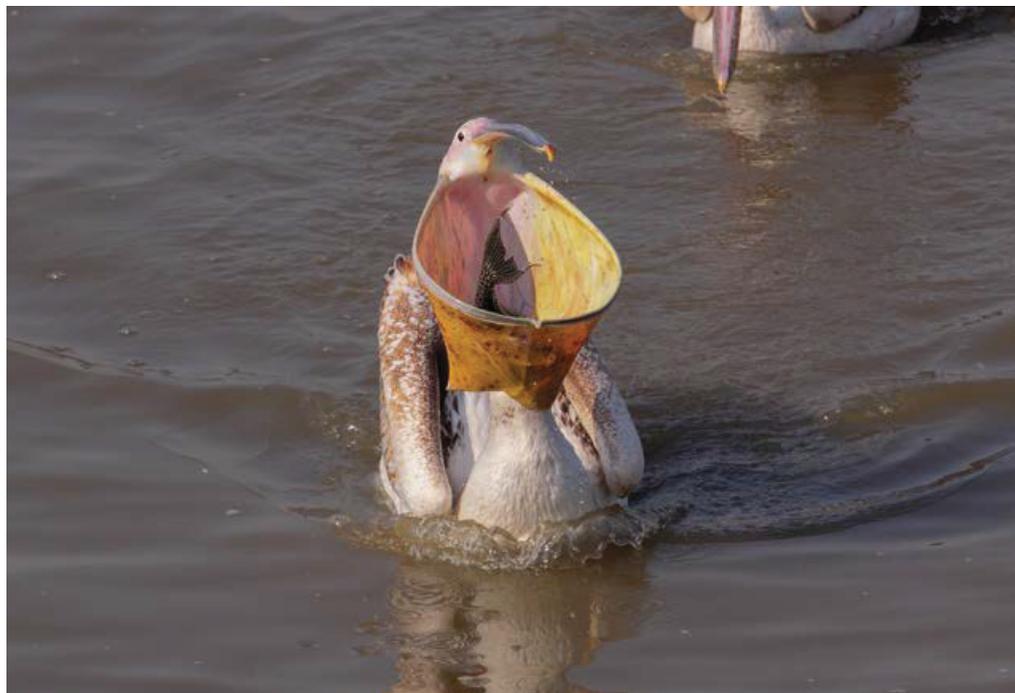


Fig 9: The pouch can also be made funnel shaped to facilitate swallowing of a larger fish.



Fig 10: Success at last. The Pelican is able to swallow the fish and then basking after having enjoyed its hard earned meal.

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