

# Helping The Little Ones

*Article and photography by Robert La Follette*

Florida is home to an abundant amount of wildlife, and without question it is our birds that are some of the most beautiful in the world. Each year, thousands of migrants make their way to our state to join the permanent residents that call Florida home and make us a bird watcher and bird photographer's paradise. With some of the most diverse ecosystems in the world it seems that birds love Florida, and we love to watch them.



Many of these birds are water or shore birds and just about anywhere one can find water you can find some of the most beautiful and interesting species. Combine that with the huge amount of fish in our waters that attract recreation and professional fishermen from all over the world, you have a place like no other. The problem begins however when the worlds collide between the birds and humans that can result in unwanted and unnecessary outcomes.

One of the most commonly seen water birds and one that is the symbol of the Florida lifestyle is the Brown Pelican. The Brown Pelican is one of seven species of Pelicans that can be found throughout the world,

however they are the only one that will dive into the water to catch its food. Just about any beach, marina, boat launch and even over wide-open waters you can find these birds. They remind us of flying dinosaurs for they are very reminiscent of some of the drawings of the ancient creatures, but they are certainly one of our beloved water birds.



The most unique feature of the Brown Pelican is how it catches its fish. The beak has a "pouch" that they use sort of like a fishing basket. When they dive, they open their mouth wide open, which then the soft pouch will act as a basket, and when they dive into the schools of fish, it "scoops" them up into the pouch. Then, the

Brown Pelican will raise its beak towards the sky, and squeeze out any of the saltwater, leaving only the fish behind which it then easily swallows. They can scoop hundreds of small fish in one dive, filling up their tummies quite nicely with their catch.

While the Brown Pelican is draining the water from its bill after a dive, Laughing Gulls often try to steal the fish right out of its pouch or pick off ones that are hanging out. They sometimes even perch on the Brown Pelican's head or back and try reach in. Brown Pelicans however are very intelligent around marinas. When they spot a fishing boat returning from the seas, they will fly in, hoping for some free handouts or scraps from the fishermen. Sometimes being lazy pays off or when the schools of fish they typically hunt are in deeper water out of their reach.



This behavior also has a drawback as fisherman commonly hooks them, which is the biggest threat to their survival. Sometimes, the hooks puncture, tear or worse, clasp their pouches shut, which is almost a certain death since they now cannot even open their mouth, or if the pouch is torn and they can't hold their catches. Brown Pelicans also are commonly wrapped in monofilament line from the hooks, and can wrap around their feet, beaks or wings that

can have dire results such as amputation, wing breakage or in worse case situations death as the line can strangle the birds when it returns to its roost in the mangroves and gets wrapped in the branches.

On a Saturday afternoon in February, I had the pleasure to spend quality time with the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary in Tampa, Florida to learn and document through photographs just how severe the problem is of hooked and injured Brown Pelicans. Standing on the south pier of the Sunshine Skyway Pier which offers one of the most dramatic panoramic views of Tampa Bay it also is one of the most popular spots on the west coast of Florida to fish as the pier offers world-class opportunities and attracts both the recreational and professional fishermen alike. It is also here that more Brown Pelicans are hooked and injured. Through the dedication and hearts of numerous volunteers they are rescued, rehabilitated and released back into the wild.



I was shocked in just that one day, which was not one of the busier days on the pier, just how many Brown Pelicans needed help. Many had hooks in their wings and bills, while many others had monofilament lines wrapped around their wings and feet. During the span of just six hours, the Suncoast volunteers rescued over a dozen Brown Pelicans, as well as numerous Royal Terns and a winter migrant, a Common Loon. It is exhausting work, as the pier is over one-mile in length and it takes time and patience to patrol such a long and extensive area.



Each rescue was different than the next as some had to be reeled in, while others had to be baited then cast-netted and brought up onto the pier. It takes a caring hand to net and catch these birds, as the last thing that is needed is further injury, so great care and communication is needed between all that are helping. Once the bird was secured, the task of finding and treating the patient began, and sometimes that meant more than one at a time. Most injuries were minor, as hooks or line was carefully removed from their wings, feathers or legs.

Each patient was also given a complete check-up, including using a portable metal detector to check for any embedded hooks that could not be seen, which was very common in many of the birds wings. They were also checked for their diet and any diseases in their bills, which is also a common problem amongst the older adults. When any additional hooks were found, they were also removed, however, there were several instances where the hook or line was too embedded or in a difficult location that needed further assistance.



For those Brown Pelicans, it meant a trip back to the sanctuary where a team of doctors and surgeons are on call to have the foreign objects removed. Each of the birds that were determined to need to be further examined was placed in a crate and would spend the next day or so recuperating until they were deemed healthy and would be set free back into the wild.

One of the keys to reducing injury to our water and shore birds is through education. Many times, if a fisherman hooked a bird, they would immediately send someone to alert one of the volunteers for help since many did not know what to do. This was a scene repeated numerous times during the day and was a refreshing sight to see. Each time, the person who accidentally hooked a Brown Pelican was offered numerous tips and information on what to do and how to catch and unhook the birds, sometimes even assisting in the procedures. This hands-on educational demonstration gave everyone the information that could very well save the lives of many Brown Pelicans, and

everyone was shocked in just how big this problem is. What was even more pleasing however is seeing the smiles on their faces as they got to help, sometimes even holding these adorable birds which goes a long way to create a healthy relationship between the fishermen and the Brown Pelicans. The sad reality is that many do not or will not learn the proper procedures and will cut their line instead of helping the hooked birds, resulting in an injured or worse, a death sentence for them.

## How To Help A Hooked Bird

A fishing hook can kill or permanently injure a bird. Please take the time to remove the hook and save a life. ***If you have hooked a bird on a "live line":***

- 1) Reel the fishing line in slowly. Don't cut the line yet!
- 2) Ask someone to help you - they may have tools and extra hands you need.
- 3) If you are on a pier, landing nets may not reach to the water. A cast net or hoop net may be used. Hoop net: immerse mouth of the net just below surface, ropes showing. Throw a fish or bait in the water so the bird has to cross 3/4 over the submerged net to retrieve it. Pull the net up quickly guided by the live line at the same time so the bird does not jump out. Do not pull a bird up just by hook or monofilament line alone.



- 4) If it is a pelican, grasp the bill in the middle. When transporting a bird, place index finger in between upper and lower bill so the bird can breathe. It is especially important to secure the head firmly on birds whose bills are smaller than the pelican's: cormorants, anhinga, loons, herons, egrets, gulls, or terns, as they are fast and have stronger bills. Grab these birds behind the eyes on the skull. Do not grab around the neck or step on the bird as a way of securing it.

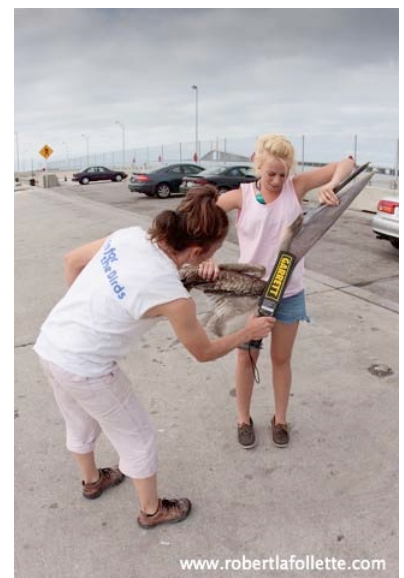
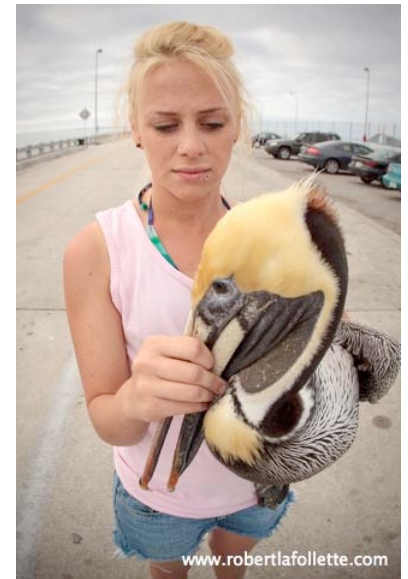
- 5) Keeping hold of the head or bill, cover the bird's head with a towel or large cloth. Try to use part of the covering or another covering as a barrier between you and the bird.

- 6) Restrain the bird by folding its wings flat against its body and holding securely.

- 7) Locate the hook, then push it through the skin until you see the barb. Cover the barb before cutting it, to prevent it from snapping off and injuring someone. Cut the barb off with a wire cutter then back the rest of the hook out. Never pull a hook out without first removing the barb. Doing so could cause major injury to the bird.

- 8) Look the bird over carefully making sure all fishing lines and hooks have been removed. Check for lines wrapped around limbs or wings.

- 9) If the bird has swallowed the hook or is seriously injured, take it to a nearest licensed rehabilitator. For a list of bird rehabbers call the Florida Wildlife Commission at 1-888-404-3922.



**10) To release:** Check for traffic and place bird gently on land - letting go of the bill last, then back away. If on a boat, place the bird gently into the water. Do not release it if it seems weak, ill, or cannot fly. Remember to discard the hooks and cut-off fishing lines in the trash can - not in the water!

## Remove Monofilament Line

Hooks and lines are the major cause of death to seabirds. A bird flying off or swimming away dragging a length of fishing line can get caught in vegetation or protruding objects. This could lead to a slow death by starvation or strangulation. Also, line embedded in the bird's flesh acts as a tourniquet, thereby preventing the flow of blood to the affected area, possibly causing the loss of a wing or leg.



## Remove Fish Hooks

Hooks left in flesh can cause infection. Do not feed the seabirds! Feeding wild birds near fishing areas can enhance their exposure to the dangers of hooks, lures and lines. The exposed bones of a large fish skeleton can puncture their stomachs causing internal infection and eventual death. Additionally, it often causes birds to become nuisance animals.

**PLEASE DON'T LEAVE BAITED HOOKS HANGING OR MULTIPLE RODS UNATTENDED!**

I want to thank the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary for allowing me to spend a day with them on the Sunshine Skyway Pier to observe, document and learn more about these adorable birds. I learned more about one of my favorite subjects to photograph in those few hours than in the past many years photographing them. To have the opportunity to get so close and help was an experience that will last a lifetime and one I will soon not forget.

I highly encourage anyone who not only loves to fish, but also has an interest in enjoying these birds get involved by volunteering in their local area or just by being more vigilant in keeping an eye out for these beautiful birds. It is up to all of us to see that our water and shore birds are here in Florida for generations to come, for without them, we will lose something special that we will never be able to replace.



## To Learn More

To learn more about the Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary and how you can help, please visit them online at [www.seabirdsanctuary.com](http://www.seabirdsanctuary.com) and to learn more about Robert La Follette and his photography, please visit [www.robertlafollette.com](http://www.robertlafollette.com).