



Nature Photography:

# Pelicans in the Chesapeake Bay

By Khai Nguyen, EPSA, SPSA





### **Pelicans are Amazing Birds**

The pelicans on Smith Island in the Chesapeake Bay belong to a brown-plumaged group. They are the smallest birds among eight pelican species, but they are still very large with very long bills compared to other birds. Brown pelicans prefer to build their nests in trees or on sea rocks. However, there are no trees on the marshy land in the Chesapeake Bay, so they nest on the ground,

which is covered mainly by grass and herbaceous plants. The population of pelicans in the United States has recovered and expanded after the ban of the pesticide DDT in 1972. As temperatures have risen during the past few decades due to climate changes, pelicans have found a new suitable breeding ground in the Chesapeake Bay.

According to government records, the first brown pelican nest was built in the Bay in 1987. Since then, pelicans have kept coming back to this area each year as early as mid-April. The shallow

waters surrounding Smith Island, with plenty of fish, provide food for pelicans as well as herons, osprey, and egrets. The pelican fossil records show that pelicans existed 30 million years ago. Pelicans have a large pouch that dangles from a bill, which can hold three gallons' worth of liquid. They use their pouch to catch food and to drain the water that is accidentally captured. Pelicans' main diet is fish. However, they also eat crustaceans, amphibians, turtles, and other birds. Pelicans normally lay two to four eggs, rarely up to six, each season. Both parents incubate with the eggs on top of or underneath the feet. Incubation takes 30–36 days. Baby birds are naked and blind at hatching and totally depend on their parents for survival. Both parents feed their young by regurgitation. After about a week, small chicks can put their heads into their parents' pouches and feed themselves. Amazingly, the young pelicans can fly in about 75 days.

### **When and Where to Photograph Pelicans**

The best time to photograph pelicans in the Chesapeake Bay is from May to August. A whole day tour takes bird watchers and





photographers from Crisfield, Maryland by a big boat to either Ewell or Tylerton villages on Smith Island, depending on the high-tide schedule. Smith Island lies approximately 10 miles west of Crisfield, Maryland, across the Tangier Sound portion of the Chesapeake Bay. It has no airport and no bridge to the mainland. It can be accessed by boat only. Tour passengers are transferred to several smaller boats from these villages to go to small marsh islands surrounded by very shallow water, where

pelicans live. Both Maryland and Virginia share Smith Island. Pelican colonies are found in both states.

Pelicans may settle in different nesting areas on Smith Island each year. The pelican tour organizer has to look for them at the beginning of each migratory season. The pelican tours are in-boat only. Bird watchers and photographers do not enter the pelican territory on foot to avoid disturbing the birds. However, small boats can move close to the shore, and tour passengers can



**Khai Nguyen,  
EPSA, SPSA**



Photos © Khai Nguyen,  
EPSA, SPSA

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.



view the birds clearly. I took this very interesting and well-organized Smith Island Pelican Tour twice in mid-June and mid-July. I should have to come as early as mid-May to see much younger pelicans.

### How To Photograph Pelicans

I used an 80mm–400mm lens to capture most of the images. The shortest focal length that I used was 80mm. I set shutter speeds at 1/3,200–1/5,000 seconds, since I was sitting on a slightly moving boat. ISO was set to auto between 200 - 2000. About 90 percent of pictures that I took have ISO between 400 – 1250. The noise was not a big problem with Nikon® D-850. To capture flying pelicans in front of me, I found that 1/5,000 second was an appropriate speed. In general, the results are quite satisfactory. I also brought a prime 500mm lens, but I did

not have a chance to use it. To capture several images of the whole pelican colony, I used a 28mm–300mm lens. One photographer in our group had trouble with his 600mm prime lens, since the birds were so close. Smith Island is only three hours' driving from my house. I do not need to fly 1,000 miles to Florida to take picture of pelicans. ■

**Khai Nguyen, EPSA, SPSA**, is a member of PSA and a resident of Fairfax, Virginia. He has loved photography since he was a teenager. After he retired from the World Bank about 10 years ago, he spent more time taking pictures of all kinds of things, especially nature, wildlife, and travel.

Khai has participated in many international photography competitions since 2013, earned several top awards, and received his EPSA. He started writing for the *PSA Journal* to share his experience with other photographers a few years ago. He will continue to do so from time to time. Writing is also his hobby.

