PLANT LIFE COLUMN

BIRDWATCHING

The snowbirds are here! These didn't drive in, they flew in. Each year, just about Christmas time, migratory American white pelicans arrive at local lakes. As I looked out my office window, I could see them glide in along the horizon to the upper basin of Lake Tohopekaliga near downtown Kissimmee.

The American white pelicans, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*, migrate from northern states such as Utah, Minnesota and South Dakota, northern California and Colorado to southern coastal states during the winter. I haven't checked their passports to see where these visitors are from. The pelicans stay until mid-spring, then begin their trip home to nest and raise their young.

While visiting our milder climate, they stock up on food to replenish their energy from the long flight and then store up for the return trip home. Sound like some of your holiday guests?

Their primary foods include small fish and freshwater crustaceans such as crayfish and shrimp. In contrast to the diving behavior seen by coastal brown pelicans, the white pelicans feed as they swim. A cluster of birds will swim in a tight V-pattern scooping fish into their enormous pouches. They then tilt their heads down to drain the water out and quickly bob their heads back up tossing the captured fish into their gullet.

These pelicans are among the largest with a wingspan over 9 feet. In flight, you will see black feathers at the tips of outstretched wings. They tuck their neck over their back so you see mostly wings with their long bill sticking out. They are very graceful as they fly and glide in long lines.

If you are out on the lake, try to avoid boating through their floating colonies and enjoy them from a distance with binoculars. It takes a lot of energy for them to fly when they need to be conserving energy the most. This holds true for the many other migratory birds such as coots and cormorants that are winter visitors.

Winter is a wonderful time for enjoying wading and water birds. There are many birds that you can enjoy in your own yard. If you haven't spent that holiday gift card yet, consider getting binoculars or a birding field guide to help you recognize some of our feathered friends.

One fun way to learn more about local birds and meet seasoned "birders" is to join the local Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society. The local chapter has educational meeting presentations and monthly field trips. Members will help you select binoculars for your budget, learn new birds and identify some of the tricky "little brown jobs", the tiny birds that flit from branch to branch.

Their next activity is the annual Christmas Bird Count, January 5. Contact Ruth Clark through their field trips page of their website at http://kissimmeeaudubon.org to sign up and get more information. You do not have to have much experience to help with the count.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission also has some great information for new bird watchers at their Wings Over Florida website. Get a beginning birdwatching guide by mail or online, Birdwatching Basics, and a checklist of common Florida Birds. Beginning and avid birders can register checklists for certificates at different levels of achievement. Start with 50 birds and advance to 350 species identified.

The University of Florida's Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation has set up a Florida bird monitoring network so you can enter and view all users' data online. You see how well you are attracting birds to your yard and compare results with other users from month to month or year to year. Small lots and yards, neighborhoods, city parks and reserves, agricultural land and large properties, lakes and
ponds, and schoolyards are all potential areas to survey birds. The survey is designed to be quick and easy to use. Go online to http://bird.ifas.ufl.edu.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology has some good bird feeder information and bird identification tips on their Project FeederWatch site.

Birdwatching is an enjoyable hobby that can entertain you for a lifetime.

Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Tip: Put your old Christmas tree to good use - use it to start a brush pile near your bird feeder. Not only will it provide good year-round cover for birds, it will take up less space at the land fill.

Upcoming FYN classes: Home and Landscape Integrated Pest Management, Monday, January 14, 6:30 PM, Agricultural Center. Home Landscaping Workshop, Tuesday, January 15, 7-9 PM. Lakeside Community Center, 2253 Lakeside Drive. Call (321) 697-3000 for more information or to pre-register.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: December 28th, 2001