



Brown Pelican

RIEN FERTEL

In this compelling book, Rien Fertel tells the story of humanity’s complicated and often brutal relationship with the brown pelican over the past century. This beloved bird with the mythically bottomless belly—to say nothing of its prodigious pouch—has been deemed a living fossil and the most dinosaur-like of creatures. The pelican adorns the Louisiana state flag, serves as a religious icon of sacrifice, and stars in the famous parting shot of *Jurassic Park*, but, most significantly, spotlights our tenuous connection with the environment in which it flies, feeds, and roosts—the coastal United States.

In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt inaugurated the first national wildlife refuge at Pelican Island, Florida, in order to rescue the brown pelican, among other species, from the plume trade. Despite such protections, the ubiquity of synthetic “agents of death,” most notably DDT, in the mid-twentieth century sent the brown pelican to the list of endangered species. By the mid-1960s, not one viable pelican nest remained in all of Louisiana. Authorities declared the state bird locally extinct.

Conservation efforts—including an outlandish but well-planned birdnapping—saved the brown pelican, generating one of the great success stories in animal preservation. However, the brown pelican is once again under threat, particularly along Louisiana’s coast, due to land loss and rising seas. For centuries, artists and writers have portrayed the pelican as a bird that pierces its breast to feed its young, symbolizing saintly piety. Today, the brown pelican gives itself in other ways, sacrificed both by and for the environment as a bellwether bird—an indicator species portending potential disasters that await.

Brown Pelican combines history and first-person narrative to complicate, deconstruct, and reassemble our vision of the bird, the natural world, and ourselves.

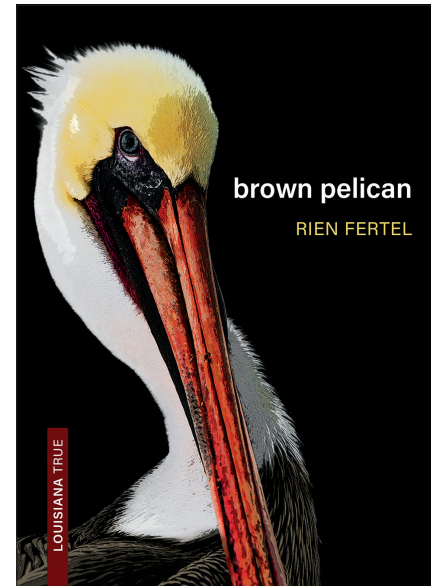
RIEN FERTEL is a writer and teacher who lives in New Orleans. He is the author of three previous books: *Drive-By Truckers’ Southern Rock Opera*, *The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog*, and *Imagining the Creole City: The Rise of Literary Culture in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*.

PRAISE FOR BROWN PELICAN

“In Louisiana, the image of the brown pelican is as common as the face of George Washington on the dollar bill. With graceful observation and a reporter’s eye, Rien Fertel nudges us to see a familiar icon in a fresh way, which is what any great writer does. In the tradition of Diane Ackerman and John McPhee, he summons facts and a gift for a good story to reveal his subject. That’s what Brown Pelican is—an abiding revelation.”—Danny Heitman, author of *A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House*

“In this beautifully written book about Louisiana’s state bird, Rien Fertel expertly weaves a nuanced understanding of place with history and science to offer to each of us a gift: a path for how we can honor and nurture the inextricable link between humans and brown pelicans. This book has instilled in me a greater appreciation of a bird I already thought I knew and has inspired me to continue advocating for the ‘greater Gulf’s canary on the coastline.”—Marybeth Lima, author of *Adventures of a Louisiana Birder: One Year, Two Wings, 300 Species*

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