Introduction

Motorists traveling along the lower Texas coast will often encounter brown pelicans on bridges during strong cold frontal passages early in the winter season. Although the exact cause is an area of ongoing research, the combination of large temperature falls with strong winds and any precipitation appear to contribute to the 3-5 foot tall, 5-10 pound birds seeking out warm water and possibly wet roadways by mistake.

Response Efforts

After large pelican losses during the 2013-14 winter season, TxDOT installed multiple 8 foot tall poles every 15 feet along favored pelican landing areas, including Texas State Highway 48, the main route between Brownsville and South Padre Island, in an attempt to deflect birds from landing on bridges. Other efforts to alert motorists about the possible pelican hazard prior to and during these events include road signs (mobile and permanent), news articles and reports, weather briefings, and social media posts.

2016-2017

On December 8th, 2016, an arctic cold front with gale force winds and light to moderate rain worked through Deep South Texas, plunging temperatures nearly 40 degrees Fahrenheit in 36 hours. On portions of Highway 48, over 70 pelicans were struck and killed by motorists. Two similar events over the next month brought total pelican deaths to over 100 for the season.

2017-2018

A cold front on December 8th, 2017, with a nearly identical temperature drop to the previous year’s initial event, coincided with at least 30 pelican deaths, followed by single digit pelican deaths into early 2018.

Pelican Watch

Volunteer pelican watch groups have banded together with Texas Wildlife officials, law enforcement, and university faculty to stage in known landing areas along Highway 48, physically helping pelicans off of roadways and bridges, while alerting motorists to the potential hazard.

Looking Ahead

During the 2017-2018 events, more than 300 pelicans were reportedly saved due to efforts from volunteers, law enforcement, news media, and the National Weather Service in Brownsville. Through early pattern recognition and effective messaging, we hope to continue to keep motorists, volunteers, law enforcement, and our brown pelicans safe during future events.