

S1E1: The Pelican Lady (Redux)

The Gulf Podcast

Season One, Episode One

Note: This episode has been revised and reproduced. It originally aired on March 5, 2020.

Introduction and Opening Scenes

<<sound of wind and waves>>

[Dr. Jen Brown]: Hi listeners, this is Jen and you're listening to The Gulf Podcast. This first episode is about how one small, determined woman made a big difference on the Texas Gulf Coast. And it's a story that has a happy ending.

Before I get to that, though, I want to let you know that this podcast is made possible by the Harte Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

So, anyway, that woman's name is Emilie Payne. She spent decade patrolling brown pelican nesting grounds in Corpus Christi Bay. Today, you can see brown pelicans all the time hanging out at marinas and jetties and flying in long squadrons down gulf beaches. But they were almost gone when Emilie started her patrols back in the late sixties. At that time, brown pelicans had disappeared entirely from Louisiana and Texas only had a handful of nesting pairs left. The pesticide DDT, habitat loss, and nesting ground disturbances all took their toll. The situation was so dire, it was even featured in the 1971 television documentary *Say Goodbye*.¹

[Say Goodbye narrator]: *DDT. In the forties, when it went into use, 60,000 pelicans thrived by fishing along the Texas Gulf Coast. Today, only 46 can be found...this year on this tiny island and nowhere else from the Mexican border to the Florida peninsula, the pelicans have hatched some young. The new additions total exactly nine.*

[Brown]: The film's producers featured Emilie's teenage daughter Beth. Beth joined her mother on birding trips and sometimes gave bird talks around the state. They filmed her wading through water and mud, looking through binoculars at birds. She looked like a typical seventies' teenager. She had straight, long blonde hair, and wore jeans, canvas shoes, a western shirt, and glasses. Like many other young Americans of the era, Beth worried about declining wildlife populations.² Here she is in the documentary:

¹ Say Goodbye, 1971 TV doc

https://archive.org/details/saygoodbye_201609/saygoodbye_201609reel2.mov. The production company later was criticized for fictionalizing some of the scenes with polar bears. See John J. O'Connor, "TV: Serious Issues in a 'Re-created Documentary,'" *New York Times*, December 10, 1971.

² When the documentary came out, the *Caller-Times* featured Beth's work in an article. See Grady Phelps, "Corpus Christi's Pelican Girl Cares for Life," *Caller-Times* (Corpus Christi, TX), January 30, 1971.

[Beth Payne]: *Whatever's killing them, pesticides or DDT or whatever it is, is going to get to us sooner or later...In the history books, they always talk about man going out and conquering nature, and it seems like they should be able to do something about coexisting instead.*

<<dark, slightly electronic transition³>>

Prelude: Passenger Pigeons

[Brown]: Since that film aired in 1971, brown pelicans have made a remarkable comeback. This success story along the Texas Gulf Coast really stands out, particularly if you think about the history of birds in America. The passenger pigeon is the most well-known example. <<sound slowly building in of a large flock of birds, getting louder and louder>> In early America, passenger pigeons were so numerous that their flocks used to blacken eastern skies.⁴ Their roosts covered miles and miles. And each year, the arrival of passenger pigeons brought feasting and celebration to natives and settlers alike.⁵ Few could have imagined that those billions of birds would disappear. <<sound becoming deafening, then abruptly stops>> But then they were gone. Martha, the last passenger pigeon, died a lonely relict in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.⁶

<<sound transition, guitar strumming⁷>>

Chapter One: Bird Hats and the Audubon Movement

[Brown]: The dramatic decline—and eventual extinction—of passenger pigeons became a warning for the Audubon movement of the late nineteenth century. It was an era when the United States became increasingly industrialized and urbanized. Americans escaped to the outdoors, hunting, fishing, and of course, birding. But those same groups became dismayed by declining wildlife populations. In response, birders formed local Audubon clubs and state chapters of the Audubon Society in Texas and elsewhere. As enthusiastic birders, women made up the vast majority of members.⁸

The Audubon movement was a grassroots effort and these women wanted to address a new threat for bird populations. That threat was bird hats. I'm totally serious. Birds. On. Hats. And we're not talking about a feather or two, but large pelts and sometimes entire birds, head and

³ xkeril, "Drone Bass Like a Dark Cave," December 4, 2021, <https://freesound.org/people/xkeril/sounds/610538/>. This sound is licensed under a Creative Commons 0 public domain license.

⁴ Price, *Flight Maps*, 1.

⁵ Price, *Flight Maps*, 1–10.

⁶ Price, *Flight Maps*, 3–6. See also Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 55–58. According to Robin W. Doughty, the passenger pigeon had disappeared in Texas by the early 1890s. Doughty, *Wildlife and Man*, 105.

⁷ Valentin Sosnitskiy, "D_G_C," <https://freesound.org/people/ValentinSosnitskiy/sounds/234354/>. This music is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license.

⁸ Merchant, *Spare the Birds!*, 15–41 and Davis, *The Gulf*, 204–209. For Texas, see Doughty, *Wildlife and Man in Texas*, 165–173. The state chapter in Texas tragically had to rebuild after losing the chapter secretary in the Galveston hurricane of 1900. Doughty, *Wildlife and Man in Texas*, 166.

all. Or, if they were small, three or four entire birds on the same hat. And the bird species weren't limited either. Songbirds, plume birds, game birds. Anything from bluebirds, herons, woodpeckers, grouse, and ducks to hummingbirds and egrets.⁹ The new fashion took five million birds each year.¹⁰ And it was a lucrative trade. Snowy egret feathers were worth twice their weight in gold.¹¹

Eventually, Audubon women found success. In the early 1900s, the federal government passed several major bird protection laws.¹² This was even more remarkable given that women didn't even have the right to vote yet in some states. Emilie Payne and her daughter Beth were part of this long Audubon tradition. They became birders soon after arriving in Corpus Christi. Here's Emilie:

[Emilie Payne]: We moved here in September, and in the early spring of the next year, which would have been 1961, my daughter read in the paper about the bird walks down in Blucher Park. Now she was nine years old at that time, and she wanted to go, and I said, "Okay, I'll take you" ...and we just happen to hit Blucher Park on a day when they had what we call a fallout. <<sound of birds singing fades in>> It was a big day. The park was full of singing, colorful, little warblers, orioles, gnatcatchers, thrushes. There was even a green heron up in the tree. There were people there to point them out to us and show us how to use the field guide <<birds fade out>>...So I was really hooked when I got home, I found all those birds in my backyard too. And for the next two weeks, that book was not out of my hands. I propped it up on the window when I did the dishes. I propped it up on the bathtub when I was in the bathtub (laughs). It did not leave my hands for two weeks, I just went right through that book. And we were hooked.

[Brown]: Emilie and Beth then joined the Corpus Christi Audubon Outdoor Club. It was founded in 1957 and still exists today. The club held meetings, went on field trips, and increasingly got involved in local environmental issues. Emilie sums up it nicely:

[Payne]: Once you're a birder, you realize you can't have those birds without the habitat.

[Brown]: Club members also counted birds to monitor populations. Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count is one of the largest. It started a century ago.¹³

⁹ "Destruction of Birds for Millinery Purposes," *Science* 7, no. 160 (Feb. 26, 1886): 196–197. See also Price, *Flight Maps*, 57–59 and Davis, *The Gulf*, 200–204.

¹⁰ This number comes from PBS, *Our National Parks*, <https://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/history/ep2/3/>.

¹¹ Burger, *Birdlife*, 283.

¹² Merchant, *Spare the Birds!*, 38–41. During the Progressive Era, Congress passed the Lacey Act (1900) to prohibit trade in wildlife that was killed illegally. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918) made it illegal to kill, capture, or sell migratory birds. President Theodore Roosevelt also got involved in bird protection during his tenure as president (1901–1909). He established the first wildlife refuge at Pelican Island in Florida. See Merchant, *Spare the Birds!*, 40–41.

¹³ See <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/history-christmas-bird-count>.

[Payne]: When time came for the Christmas bird count, of course I was anxious to do that. In those days, the Outdoor Club was strictly for adults. Children were not welcome, even as guests. But my daughter had become so good (laughs) that she was allowed to go along on the Christmas Bird Count. If you want to look at birds, take a child with you because their vision is so good, they pick up the movement. They're wonderful to have along on a bird count, if they're birding oriented.

[Brown]: After doing a count on Pelican Island and witnessing the declining populations, Emilie started her long-running pelican patrols.

<<sound transition, guitar strumming>>

Chapter Two: Brown Pelican Declines (Disturbances and DDT)

[Brown]: I can see why Emilie and Beth were fascinated by brown pelicans. When they fly, they look like they're from another time period. They're not quite Cretaceous, but they definitely look prehistoric. Sometimes, they catch the winds on coastal bluffs and sail along for miles. On the ground, they waddle around with short, squatty legs. They're even more awkward when they dive for fish. In breeding season, brown pelicans have one mate and both parents take turns incubating eggs and feeding their young.¹⁴ And brown pelican chicks are strangely adorable. When they hatch, they're basically weird little naked birds. They don't get fuzzy until they are about three weeks old. But that also makes their nests on saltwater marshes and grassy islands even more vulnerable.

[Brown]: Because of that, Emilie Payne and others protected nests to help with population declines. David Blankinship was a research biologist and a warden for the Audubon Society in the late sixties and early seventies. Here's David talking about his work during an interview with the Texas Legacy Project back in 2000:

[David Blankinship]: The Brown Pelicans numbered, oh, several thousand nesting pairs back around the turn of the century and then they began a slow decline and probably as a result of several factors but one of which was persecution by commercial fishermen because they thought that they were competing for fish and so they would go and destroy the nesting sites and things like that...One other problem that we could see was there was a lot of disturbance of the nesting sites by just sport fishermen and by sightseers and so forth. They really didn't realize that they were causing a problem.¹⁵

[Brown]: Both commercial and sport fishermen mistakenly thought pelicans ate their fish. Emilie heard stories from commercial fishermen:

¹⁴ Burger, *Birdlife of the Gulf*, 264.

¹⁵ Thanks to David Todd and the Texas Legacy Project for sharing this interview. You can find the full transcript here: <http://texaslegacy.org/transcripts/david-blankinship/>, and the video of the interview here: http://av.cah.utexas.edu/index.php?title=TexLegacyProj:David_Blankinship_Interview.

[Emilie Payne]: And he and his dad just told me, he said “We used to go out there,” because they thought those pelicans were competing with them for their fish. Pelicans eat menhaden and we don’t harvest menhaden here...his words I think were, “We’d done everything to those birds.” For three generations, the nesting area had been destroyed, and after three generations, you’ve only got a few old birds left, you know, you don’t have any young replacements.

[Brown]: Along with nesting disturbances, a new threat emerged after World War II. Hundreds of new human-made pesticides came into widespread use. DDT was one of the most hazardous—and one of the most widely used across the nation. In the South, it was sprayed to combat fire ants and mosquitoes.¹⁶ Growing agribusiness in the Mississippi River Basin also washed pesticides downstream into the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁷ This created all sorts of problems.¹⁸ DDT was particularly bad for birds who ate fish. For brown pelicans, DDT weakened the eggshell so much that parents crushed their own eggs when they sat down to incubate them.¹⁹ All of this took its toll on the brown pelican population, which fell to historic lows by the 1960s. In Louisiana, brown pelicans are the state bird. But it was so bad there that they had disappeared from the state and later had to be reintroduced.²⁰ In Texas, less than one hundred birds remained, and they only had an average of three or four new birds each year.²¹

<<dark music fades in>>

Chapter Three: Emilie’s Pelican Patrols

[Brown]: It was around this time that Emilie and her young daughter Beth first did a bird count on Pelican Island. Emilie also started going back to school at Del Mar College, then at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, which was then called Texas A&I-Kingsville.

[Emilie Payne]: I signed up for an independent study to find out why the birds were nesting on that island and not the others...Because I had signed up with an independent study, and had to turn in an incomplete on this because there was no birds to look at. I got a letter in the mail that I was on scholastic probation and, mind you, I’m a straight A student (laughter)...Then in the spring, the birds began to come in, and in 1970, I think we had five brown pelican nests out there that successfully produced young. So, that’s how I got started.

¹⁶ See Carson, *Silent Spring*, 6–13, 161–172.

¹⁷ King, Flickinger, and Hildebrand, “Decline of Brown Pelicans,” 426–427.

¹⁸ For details see, among many others, Carson, *Silent Spring*.

¹⁹ Burger, *Birdlife of the Gulf*, 189–190.

²⁰ Burger, *Birdlife of the Gulf*, 261–266. For more details on the reintroduction, see Holm et al., “Population Recovery,” 431–437.

²¹ The exact average was 3.6 young birds. King, Flickinger, and Hildebrand, “Decline of Brown Pelicans,” 428. See also King et al., “Brown Pelican Populations and Pollutants,” and King et al., “Brown Pelican Fatality.”

[Brown]: Emilie began to take weekend trips to Pelican Island to make sure nests weren't disturbed. At first, she got boat rides from oil company workers, then she hired local fishermen, and eventually she got her own boat.²²

[Payne]: That first trip that we went out there. It would have been in '68, I think I found three nests. Then we had five nests the following year...one year, we had none. I was able to see how devastating disturbances were to all of the nesting birds, not just the pelicans, but disturbances of kinds you would not imagine. People, of course, wandering around on the island. Fishermen, campers, people flying kites over the island. I don't know how many times I would find kite strings strung out and birds twisted up in it. Um, dogs, people turning their dogs loose out there. Airplanes...All kinds of disturbances that are pretty devastating to bird nesting. You just never knew when you went out what you were going to deal with.

[Brown]: Emilie said she handled it as best she could.

[Payne]: I did have one advantage in that I'm short and female, and apparently people aren't afraid of me. When I would find people out there, I would just walk up to them and talk to them, you know, and generally I got a lot of cooperation from them, especially if there was a family. The wife was always the one who I would talk to, or the children. And then they just didn't understand. You have to re-educate every year.

[Brown]: What's amazing to me is that she did this for twenty years so I had to ask what kept her going back for two decades?

[Payne]: Well, who else was going to do it? There wasn't anyone else to do it. You get very possessive of it, very protective of it.

[Brown]: She even cleaned up an oil spill by herself, when remnants of the Ixtoc oil spill in Mexico washed up in Texas.

[Payne]: So when I went out to Pelican Island, that's where the oil was. Globbs of oil about the size of apples, but so widespread, so many of them, that a pelican could not have sat down on them, and they do, they sit on their belly, on the sand without getting oiled. It was everywhere. I called the Coast Guard, and went out there with three young men from the Coast Guard and we walked along the shoreline, and they said, "Yes, ma'am, you do have oil out here, but there's not enough of it. It doesn't meet our criteria. We can't come out here and clean this up." They gave me a big box of plastic bags, and I took my shovel, and I cleaned up oil...There was no other way to handle it, that I could see. I knew I didn't want to take a bunch of people out there because that's the disturbance I'm trying to eliminate.

²² For more stories on the brown pelican patrols and comeback, see Barcott, "The Other Coast Guard," Casteel, "Brown Pelicans," 5–16, and Todd and Ogren, *The Texas Landscape Project*, 343–352.

[Brown]: And Emilie Payne wasn't the only one with that sort of determination. Up the coast in Matagorda Bay, retired oil worker Chester Smith patrolled nesting grounds starting about the time that Emilie stopped doing her patrols. Chester continued for twenty-five years until he passed away at the age of ninety. The island he patrolled was renamed Chester Island in his honor.²³

<<sound transition, guitar strumming>>

Conclusion: The Comeback

[Brown]: Eventually the volunteers started seeing more pelicans. The comeback was in part thanks to Rachel Carson's bestselling book *Silent Spring*. By warning of "a spring without voices," Carson thoughtfully alerted Americans to the dangers of the indiscriminate use of DDT and other pesticides.²⁴ This led to a nationwide ban of DDT in 1972. Brown pelicans also needed protected nesting grounds. Here's David Blankinship again:

[David Blankinship]: The key to wildlife management is habitat. Talk about business and they say the key to business is location, location, location. Well when it comes to wildlife, it's habitat, habitat, habitat.

[Brown]: That's where Emilie, Beth, Chester, and others came in. They helped brown pelicans produce young undisturbed. Gulf populations today are estimated around 25,000 breeding pairs.²⁵ It's such a great success story. But unlike brown pelicans, many other bird species are in trouble today. An important recent study documented the losses of three billion birds since 1970 alone.²⁶ That's where Emilie's story offers hope. If brown pelicans could come back from the brink of extinction along the Gulf Coast, habitat protection and dedicated volunteers and scientists could help with other bird declines.

[Blankinship]: I guess that one of the most rewarding things I've been involved with, if not the most rewarding, has been the—the recovery of the Brown Pelican population in Texas.

[Brown]: Emilie Payne still gets to see the payoff for spending two decades on a boat in Corpus Christi Bay.

[Payne]: Still today, when I hit Doddridge and Ocean and see a brown pelican sailing by, I feel so good, there's one of mine (laughs).

[Brown]: Oh, and that incomplete? She finished it.

²³ Barcott, "The Other Coast Guard."

²⁴ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 2.

²⁵ Estimates range from about 23,000 to 30,000 breeding pairs in 2018. Burger, *Birdlife of the Gulf*, 268.

²⁶ Rosenberg et al., "Decline of the North American Avifauna," 120. The authors state there is a "long-developing but overlooked biodiversity crisis in North America."

[Payne]: I saved that paper. The professor gave me an A++. I saved that (laughter).

<<sound of wind and waves>>

Credits

[Brown]: The Gulf Podcast is sponsored by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. You can read the episode script and a list of sources on our website. There, you will also find, in-depth oral history interviews and transcripts from Emilie Payne and many others. You can also follow the podcast on Instagram and Facebook, and subscribe on all the regular podcasting platforms. Special thanks to David Todd and the Texas Legacy Project for sharing interview clips. And thank you all for listening, I'm going to leave you with one more story from Emilie's pelican patrols.

[Payne]: I remember being in the water, I wore my hip boots, looking through the telescope at nesting pelicans, reading off the bands and everything. Got on the eastern end of the island, and I turned around and there was a boat, and they were waving a red flag...This is a sign of distress, wave this red flag. So I put my telescope up, put everything in the boat, got in the boat and went on out there, and as I got closer to him, he held up a cartoon of beer, the red was his trunks, he just wanted to party (laughter). Nope, we're not doing that, we're not doing that. He wasn't in trouble.

<<sounds of shorebirds>>

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