



PHOTO BY JOHN THOMSON III

A male juvenile brown pelican was seen at Sands Point recently.

Pelican visit surprises LI

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The first sighting was last month in Montauk. Then came two more reports earlier this month from the Sands Point area, and the local birding community was abuzz.

The object of everyone's curiosity was a brown pelican, a species rarely seen in these parts and even more unusual in winter.

Excited local birders say the lone juvenile brown pelican, which usually calls the coastal southern United States home, was seen most recently Monday at Point Lookout on Lido Beach. "It is a pretty rare occurrence, so I would imagine it's the same one," said John Thomson, amateur birder and owner of Atlantic Outfitters in Port Washington, who saw the pelican in mid-December on a boat trip to Execution Rocks Lighthouse off Sands Point.

Before that, it was spotted — and recorded on a regional rare bird alert Internet list — in Fort Pond Bay in Montauk on Nov. 26 and 27.

"This is not its normal range," said Jennifer Wilson-Pines, a veteran birder and vice president of the North Shore Audubon Society. "You wouldn't expect to see them here, but they're easily identified,



GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO

Local birders say the brown pelican is rarely seen near LI.

able, so there's absolutely no mistaking it."

The brown pelican's distinguishing features — such as its 6- to 8-foot wingspan and long, narrow beak — and its uncommon visits are part of the reason local birders are eagerly tracking it. But environmentalists love to see the bird for another reason: The brown pelican was just removed from the endangered species list in 2009. And one year later, after the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill, the symbol of the crisis became oil-slicked photos of Louisiana's state bird.

"I was amazed," Thomson said of his run-in with the bird. "I grew up on the Long Island Sound and so did my dad, and nobody had ever heard of a pelican around here before."

Many naturalists attribute the random appearance to Tropical Storm Irene, which

could have blown the young bird off course. "With these types of winds, this is an event that happens. The birds either get caught in the wind or they get pushed in front of the storm," said Bill Fonda, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

But Mary Normandia, vice president of the Queens County Bird Club and co-compiler for the Northern Nassau annual Christmas Bird Count, said there could be another reason.

"With climate change, they're moving up here — a lot of birds are moving about, looking for better places to live," she said.

Local birders are also in a frenzy about recent sightings in Calverton of the mountain bluebird, rarely seen in these parts.

While a rare bird sighting is a treat for locals, experts say they hope the pelican will start flying south where the climate is more hospitable. Normandia added that whenever a bird strays from its native region, there's always a chance it might not make it back.

But, she said, "The bigger the bird, the better its chances of survival. It won't take that many flaps to get it back down South again."