

## History

Pelican Island has long been home to many kinds of birds. In 1859, Dr. Henry Bryant reported seeing thousands of herons, egrets, pelicans, ibises, and spoonbills, all nesting in harmony among the tree tops of black and red mangroves. However, plume hunters had already arrived to begin their relentless slaughter of countless egrets, herons, spoonbills, and even pelicans. The annihilation was so complete that by 1903 only brown pelicans were left. And Pelican Island was the last home for brown pelicans along the entire east coast of Florida.

The pelicans might not be here today if it wasn't for a man by the name of Paul Kroegel. Kroegel was a German

immigrant who homesteaded in Sebastian with his father and brother. They settled at Barker's Bluff in

Sebastian, partly because of the proximity to Pelican Island.

Paul Kroegel took a special interest in the pelicans as he watched them from his home. Paul initiated a campaign to protect the birds at Pelican Island and invited influential visitors to go with him and witness the carnage. When well known naturalists like Dr. Frank Chapman arrived in the area. Ma Latham, who ran the nearby Oak Lodge opposite of Micco, sent word to Kroegel. Kroegel successfully enlisted their support.

In 1901, a State law was passed to protect all non-game

birds and Paul Kroegel was hired by the Florida Audubon Society to protect Pelican Island. It was at the urging of both the Florida Audubon Society and the American Ornithologist's Union, that President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt issued the Executive

Order on March 14, 1903, proclaiming Pelican Island be "reserved and set aside...as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds". Two weeks later, on April 1, Kroegel was appointed warden by the federal government for a salary of \$1 per month. The refuge was expanded by a second executive order to include several neighboring mangrove islands on January 26, 1909.

The threat from plume hunters diminished, but a new threat was looming. In the Spring of 1918, a group of young commercial fishermen set out for Pelican Island at night and killed hundreds of defenseless pelican chicks. They claimed that the pelicans were taking too many fish. This controversy was spreading until a Florida Audubon Society study showed that the bulk of the pelican's diet consisted of commercially unimportant baitfish.

Paul Kroegel protected and managed Pelican Island NWR until 1926 after the island became flooded and the pelicans abandoned Pelican Island for several years. Freezes and floods had taken their toll on Pelican Island over the years, but the island and the birds have always recovered from natural disasters.



In 1963, an unnatural threat arose. The bottomlands surrounding Pelican Island were proposed to be sold by the State to private development. The Indian River Preservation League was formed by local citrus growers, commercial fishermen, and sportsmen to fight this proposal which included the dredging of a bulkhead and filling of vitally important seagrass beds. The local citizens won their fight. The State leased the 616 acres of nearby mangrove islands to

Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge. The lease with the State was renewed in 1968 to encompass about 4760 acres of submerged bottomlands and grass beds. Since 1979, the refuge has acquired over 100 acres of buffer along the shoreline of the adjacent barrier island. The buffer will help protect the integrity of the nation's first national wildlife refuge from encroaching residential development.



*The black and white photos were taken during the Kroegel years.*

Pelican Island, a small three-acre island on Florida's east central coast, holds a unique place in America's

history. In 1903, Pelican Island became

the nation's first national wildlife refuge. From this small beginning has grown a national wildlife refuge system of over 500 refuges encompassing over 92 million acres.

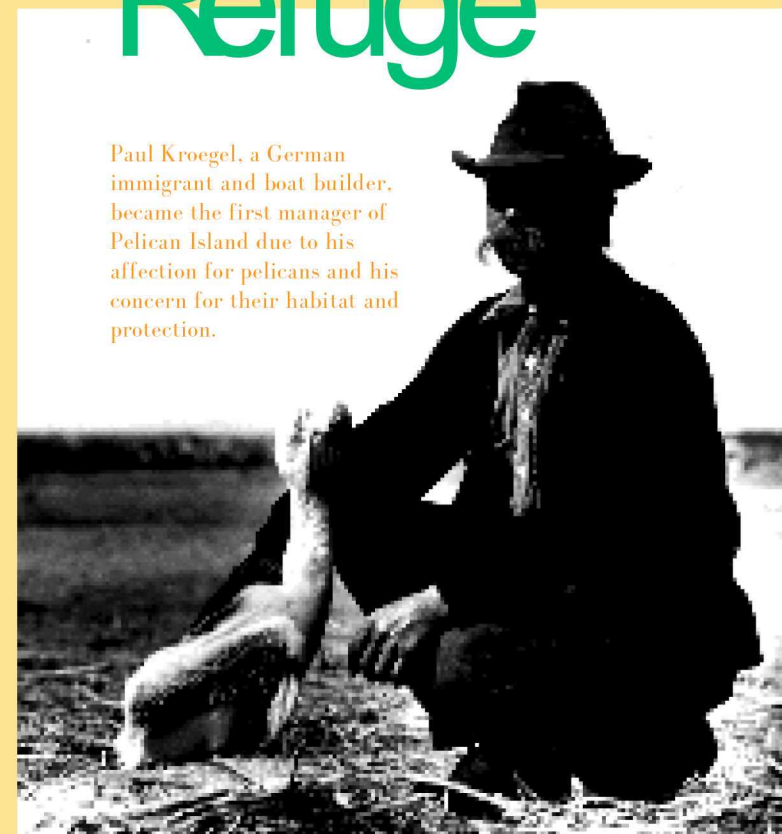


U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge  
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# Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge

Paul Kroegel, a German immigrant and boat builder, became the first manager of Pelican Island due to his affection for pelicans and his concern for their habitat and protection.



AMERICA'S FIRST