CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME OSPR
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ

News Release

MEDIA CONTACTS: **JUNE 6, 2006**

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More Signs of Return for California Brown Pelicans

Prince Island, located near San Miguel Island at the north end of the pelican's main historical breeding range in southern California, is one of three current breeding locations in California; pelicans nested there sporadically at least until 1939. Natural colony re-establishment at Prince Island and other historic breeding sites could reflect the continuing return of this endangered seabird.

The California brown pelican is a subspecies of the widely distributed brown pelican. It breeds in the Gulf of California, along the Sinaloa and Nayarit coast of mainland Mexico, along the Pacific coast of Baja California, and north to the California Channel Islands. Non-breeding pelicans range north along the Pacific coast as far as Washington and British Columbia.

Following reproductive failure, severe population decline, and colony losses from the 1940s to 1970s, the California brown pelican was federally-listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1970, and state-listed as endangered by the California Fish and Game Commission in 1971. The pelican is also identified as a Fully Protected species in California under Section 3511 of the Fish and Game Code. The USFWS was petitioned to de-list this subspecies in California in December 2005, and recently completed an initial 90-day review of that petition. The Service will now undertake a more comprehensive study, known as a 12 month status review, to determine whether or not to propose the California brown pelican for delisting. The Service will also review the status of all brown pelicans currently protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) throughout their range as required.

The decline of the California brown pelican caused by persistent marine pollutants was one of the major events that helped to develop public concern for the environment and related laws in California in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Contamination by the pesticide DDT resulted in thin eggshells that broke under the pressure of incubating adult pelicans. The pesticide was determined to be the primary cause of reproductive failures and population declines in southern California and coastal Baja California, and was banned in the U.S. in 1972. Human disturbance of breeding colonies and roosts also contributed to population declines and poor reproduction. Oil spills and entanglement in fishing tackle are other known threats to this species.

Recovery efforts in the last three decades have resulted in the seabird again becoming a common bird along the west coast of the U.S., after being reduced to small numbers from the 1960s to 1980s.

Researchers from the University of California, Davis, and California Institute of Environmental Studies (CIES) began studying the remaining U.S. colony of birds at Anacapa Island in 1970. The size of this colony fluctuates annually (as is typical of the species), but has increased since the early 1980s to a mean size of about four to five thousand pairs. In 1980, a second U.S. colony was established at Santa Barbara Island and has been monitored by CIES and Channel Islands National Park. Since then, this colony has grown steadily but with annual fluctuations to several hundred pairs.

During the last year, CIES biologists found other indications of the seabird's continuing recovery, including the first-known nesting at Middle Anacapa Island, small numbers breeding on East Anacapa Island (only the second time since 1928), and an expanded distribution of pelican nesting at Santa Barbara Island. Since the 1970s, numbers of non-breeding California brown pelicans have also increased dramatically in northern California, Oregon and Washington.

UCSC aerial photographic surveys of seabird colonies in southern California are being supported by DFG–OSPR. Seabirds are vulnerable to impacts from oil spills and chronic oil pollution, as well as disturbance caused by human activities occurring too close to breeding areas. Using aerial photographs, seabird biologists are able to count birds and nests to estimate population sizes and trends for assessing continuing injuries to natural resources from oil spills and other marine pollutants. Aerial photographs are also used to study the success rates of restoration projects designed to assist natural recovery. DFG-OSPR provides partial funding for similar surveys in central and northern California.