Photographing California Brown Pelicans in La Jolla

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January 2015

Canon 1Ds Mark III, 500 f/4 lens + 1.4x teleconverter, ISO 400, manual exposure, f/11 @ 1/640. [link]

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January 2015: I updated this note to reflect my latest thoughts on the best lens, and to share some examples of pelican head throw photos. Each of the next 17 images was made with the Canon 200-400 f/4 L IS USM Extender 1.4x lens. I shot all of these handheld, which is my preference when at all possible. They are all tack sharp on the eye with no shake blur. This lens is unbelievable, the finest supertelephoto I have ever owned or used, hands down. For my purposes it is as sharp as any of the super telephoto primes I have owned/used, and its versatility is unmatched. It is usually the only lens I bother to take when I head out the door to photograph birds. I can shoot flight images at the short end (around 300mm is what I usually end up using, including the following images) and for portraits, birds in surf and distant images I can rack the lens out to 400mm and with a simple flip of a switch I can engage the built-in 1.4x teleconverter, making the reach of the lens now 560mm f/5.6. Coupled with one Canon’s current bodies, this lens is wonderful. I shot with it on safari in Kenya in September, and it covered virtually all of my wildlife needs. If you can budget for this lens and you have the subjects for which is was designed (wildlife, sports) you won’t be sorry.
Head Throws

Regarding “head throws”: this is perhaps the most peculiar behavior that pelicans exhibit and is quite challenging to photograph. Also known as a “bill throw”, it occurs when a pelican throws its head up and back, way way back. The head throw is thought to be a way for the pelican to stretch the skin of its gular pouch — its throat — in order to maintain its flexibility and health. The California race of brown pelican exhibits striking mating coloration in winter, including a colorful red and green throat, yellow head and breast patch, and a bright white or deep chestnut brown hind neck. When a California brown pelican tosses its head back into a bill throw, the rich olive and red colors of its throat are really on display. This year (2015) I decided to focus my photography on a couple aspects of these birds that I had not yet photographed to my satisfaction in the past, one of which was the head throw. (The other is birds and surf.) I had plenty of head throw photos before, including some very nice ones, but I wanted to make some new really top notch ones, real keepers. I now have dozens of head throw sequences captured by my camera this season (thank you Canon 200-400) but only a few that I feel are really perfect, framed well with super light, rich color and sharp as a tack. So I’ll keep practicing.
One key to photographing this behavior is to know where and when to find pelicans — that’s no secret. Another is to have ideal conditions. I live in the San Diego area so I can simply look outside to make sure the skies are clear — yielding perfect light for about an hour after sunrise — before investing the time to go shoot. Lastly, the pelicans need to be in the right mood — not bothered by people, dogs or big waves — and preening, drying and warming themselves in the sun. It is when they are relaxed and preening that they will do head throws. Once the pelican has lain down it is unlikely to do any more bill throws.

A challenge is anticipating when a head throw will occur, since they seem to be almost random for folks unfamiliar with pelicans. With lots of practice and 25 years spent watching this colony every winter, I’ve become fairly good at knowing when a bird is about to throw its head back, and can frame up the act and capture it reasonably well about 50% of the time. (Hey, even a blind squirrel sometimes find a nut!) Often before a pelican performs a head throw, it will cock its head and neck at a odd angle, clap its beak once or twice, maybe even invert its throat (like sticking out its tongue) before it grows still. It may open its beak slightly as it pauses. Then, quickly, it raises its bill straight up and back, mouth open, then closing the mouth as it lowers it beak again. 2 seconds later, its over. But fortunately, a pelican that has just done a head throw is fairly likely to do it again in a few moments, so be ready to get it the second time if you miss it the first time.
A tip for photographers: don’t have too much lens! The Canon 200-400 (with built in extender) on a full frame body is, in my opinion, perfect for all pelican photography in La Jolla. I see serious out-of-town bird photographers with 600 or 800mm, perhaps even on a crop body. Perhaps they are looking for head portraits or really compressed, distant flight shots. But if you want full body flight and head throw shots in La Jolla, I recommend 300mm as a starting point, and sometimes I will shoot a bit wider if there are lots of pelicans right up close to where I like to shoot from. With a 600mm or 800mm, it may be hard to fit the entire bird when it is stretched out to its fullest during a head throw along with enough negative space, and there is a good chance you will clip the head or feet unless you are way back. (I’ve even seen a few guys this year return to their cars to get a second setup because the 500mm they were using was too much for flight and head throws.) Yes, once you realize you have just clipped the feet during the head throw that you spent $4000 and travelled from the east coast to shoot, you could take several photos immediately afterward of the feet, rocks, etc and Franken-blend a composite using techniques learned in your last workshop. Just see what happens when you submit that image to a major contest or a decent publication, though. Better to get it right in the camera the first time. A rough rule of thumb I have when waiting for a head throw is to expect the composition to be about twice as tall as the bird is when it is relaxed and sitting.
March 2010: I updated this note in response to questions I have received from other photographers looking for information about pelicans in La Jolla, particularly what lenses to bring. The last few years I have changed some of my thinking about how best to shoot flight images of pelicans, preferring 300mm for flight and 500mm for portraits, always on full frame bodies. Stemming from years photographing the pelicans in La Jolla (the product of which was often very poor photography), this note originally appeared as a blog entry on my website OceanLight.com, then as a short article on Naturescapes.net. Please know that there is no need to attend a “workshop” to photograph these birds. In my opinion you will likely have better luck with your photography and enjoy a more peaceful morning by visiting the cliffs alone. A photographer is far less likely to disturb the birds and the surroundings at this location by working patiently and alone than by visiting as part of a workshop or group.

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Photographing California Brown Pelicans in La Jolla

A morning visit to the cliffs of La Jolla to photograph seabirds is on the list of many California photographers. Note I did not say “bird photographers”. This location is appealing because good seabird photographs are easily achieved here, to the extent that shooters like myself with modest bird photography skills can have really productive sessions and in a single visit can generate a variety of strong images to add to their collections. Bird photographers come from throughout the country to train their lenses on these special birds and the scenic coastline of La Jolla, and for good reason. I photograph primarily ocean subjects, including coastal birds when I have the patience. Among seabirds I find the California race of the brown pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis) particularly attractive and fun to watch, so when I am in La Jolla shooting it is the pelican that gets most of my attention.

Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 400, manual exposure mode, f/6.3 @ 1/2500, 8:30am. [link]

There are two really good places to photograph the pelicans: atop the bluff which sits atop the La Jolla Cave (park near the cave shop if you can), and at the point where the sidewalk widens and makes a left-hand bend as you walk down the hill from the cave shop to the La Jolla cove. All of these shots are from these two locations. [Google map]
The best time to visit the La Jolla cliffs is during the winter months, sunrise through mid-morning. The California brown pelican displays its most colorful mating plumage from late December through February, punctuated by a dramatic red throat pouch and dark brown neck. Non-breeding adults will have the red throat but present a white neck. Typically, winter mornings in San Diego offer clear skies and good sunlight conditions for photography, and if you are fortunate the wind will also be in your favor (i.e., offshore) when you are there. If you can manage to time your visit during the week you will probably share the small cliff top area with fewer people than if you visit on the weekend. As you will see, the fewer photographers occupying the limited space on the cliffs, the better. Upon arriving you may not find many pelicans on the cliffs, or none at all, or a whole crowd of them. Regardless, move slowly so that the birds that are there can become used to your presence and are not shocked into taking flight. Pelicans that are on the cliffs are there to rest, and if they are flushed they will likely settle down on another cliff and not return for quite a while, if at all.

Watch that you hold detail in the whites and don't clip the highlights, its easy if the pelican is in direct sunlight. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens with 1.4x II converter (effective 700mm), ISO 200, Av mode with −0.7 compensation, f/7.1 @ 1/1250, 10:15am. Its getting late in the morning and the light getting harsh, but if you watch your shadows you can still pick off some pleasing images. You can always try bouncing a little flash to fill in the shadows below the bird and give it a catchlight but flash is usually overpowered when competing with this much direct sunlight. [link]

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The waxing light before sunrise can offer pleasing pastel-colored backgrounds against which to frame up gulls and pelicans. I often see photographers combining pastel-colored ambient light with a bit of strobe fill. This is a delicate balance of light and is made difficult by the need for high ISO (e.g., 400) to freeze the wings with shutter speed. However, the high ISO means you must not underexpose to avoid excessive shadow noise. Don’t be afraid to meter so that the clear dawn sky, with the sun at your back, is at +2 or more stops, decreasing gradually as the sun rises. A Better Beamer can be helpful to increase the throw (distance) of your flash, and a bracket serves to position the flash off the axis of the lens to avoid red-eye.

Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4, ISO 200, manually exposed so that sky was +2 stops, f/8 @ 1/80, Canon 580EX strobe with Better Beamer to extend the reach of the flash. Manual ambient exposure is the way to go here. Adjust your overall ambient (e.g., available light, sunlight) exposure so the sky looks good. I like it near the right side of the histogram without actually clipping. Then dial your flash exposure up and down (with either the manual power setting if you shoot manual strobe, or with the flash compensation adjustment if you shoot automatic flash) until you get a pleasing amount of light on the bird. [link]
Canon 1Ds Mark III, 300mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 500, f/8 @ 1/80, flash with –1 EV compensation. Same exposure thinking as in the previous photo: manual exposure to control the available light (background), then dial the flash compensation up or down until the flash-fill illumination on the bird looks optimal. [link]
Direct sun will light the reach cliffs and birds about 30 minutes after sunrise proper, being blocked for a while by La Jolla’s Mount Soledad behind you. You will find that you can frame up the resting and preening pelicans that are standing on the cliff edges with attractive frontlighting -- the type of lighting I prefer -- by ensuring that your shadow is pointed directly at the birds. As in portrait photography, front lighting with a long lens serves to flatten and simplify the subject in a flattering way. Pelicans are contrasty, with coloration ranging from pure white and hot yellow and red to deep gray and black; side lighting is just too harsh for my taste.

Framing individual birds against a distant, out of focus, pleasing blue or green ocean backdrop is dead easy. The key to creating a defocused background is to place a relatively uncomplicated background at a great distance relative to the subject. In La Jolla the pelicans are 15-50’ (5-15m) from you while the background cliffs, waves or blue ocean range from a hundred yards to a mile away or more. With distance ratios like that it is possible to stop down to f/8 or f/11 to hold depth of field on the subject with a 500mm lens and still achieve a defocused background, making the subject’s edges appear especially sharp. Take advantage of soft background and leave negative space in some of your vertical compositions to allow for that cover shot that will allow you to retire early. Before the sun climbs too high it is possible to put a catchlight from the sun in your pelican’s eye, or to maximize the visibility of water droplets on a pelican that has just returned.
from the water. To do this, position your subject so that the sun is directly behind you and low. If the shadow of your lens lies just to the side of your subject, you are in the right spot.

Focus on the eye! I try to put critical focus on my subject’s eye in all of my wildlife photographs, and pelicans are no exception. The eye of an animal, especially in a portrait composition, is an anchor for the viewer. Invariably and naturally, when first viewing a photograph a viewer’s glance is immediately drawn to the subject’s eye. For this reason the eye must be tack sharp and well-placed. Once that is achieved, use what depth of field is available (given the available light and choice of shutter speed and ISO) to try for sharp chest, head and neck details, knowing that depth of field with super-telephotos is notoriously small and that some near or far detail may be a bit soft.

Some mornings you will catch some purple, orange or red sky in the background, generally low to the horizon, before the sun hits the birds on the cliffs. I photographed this pelican just as it flew up into the first rays of sun before the color had entirely disappeared from the sky behind it. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 400, manual exposure mode, f/6.3 @ 1/2500, 7:30am. [link]

For best flight shots I hope for a clear horizon and offshore morning breezes, so that the pelicans approach the cliffs upwind and are frontlit as they fly directly toward the lens. In this way their faces and undersides are illuminated as they spread those huge wings to soar and land. It is tempting to shoot frames as they fly past, and I have certainly shot my share of those. But back at the editing table I find that in nearly every case side lighting produces an image that is too harsh and gets tossed. If you do not have offshores don’t despair; often upon approach to the cliffs the pelicans will wheel and make a second pass before deciding where to set down, especially if the cliff is already crowded with pelicans or people. Take advantage of these loops to obtain the angle you need.

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When shooting pelicans in flight in La Jolla the background will quickly change from bright sky to deep blue ocean water, whitewash and waves to brown sandstone cliffs. These situations will fool your light meter and, if you are shooting in one of the automatic modes, will often produce blown head and wing highlights or an underexposed bird. Metering with a handheld incident meter, or using your in-camera spot meter on a neutral area such as a grey guano-covered rock, is recommended. In a pinch I will set my exposure so that the palm of my (caucasian) hand is at +1.

Flaps down, braking to land. This shot is dead easy when the wind is blowing in the same direction the sun is shining. Most people use the higher frame rate bodies for this, but I've been able to nail this shot often with my 4-fps 1DsII. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 320, manual exposure mode, f/5 @ 1/1600, 9:00am. [link]

Pelicans brake dramatically as they land. If you are standing back on the top of the cliffs and hoping to get a shot of a pelican with wings spread wide coming straight at you, you may want to step forward a bit and aim for the lower cliffs. I find the vantage point shooting down at the lower cliffs works better, since the pelicans landing there are rising up off the water at an angle that takes them straight at you and with undersides well illuminated. Also, compared to the pelicans that just suddenly appear from below the edge of the top cliffs, those landing on the lower cliffs are easier to track and focus as they approach over the water.
Yup, I clipped the wingtip. That is what separates real bird photographs from guys like me. I shoot a lot of pan-blurs in the morning before the sun hits the birds. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 50, Av with +0.7 compensation, f/11 @ 1/30, 8:45am. [link]

Usually I check out the window for clear skies before committing to a drive down the coast to La Jolla. However, I have had a few mornings where I find myself in La Jolla and the light is terrible. Overcast, spotty, drab. This is more typical of San Diego coastal mornings in May, June and July but it does happen in winter too. Don’t let it spoil your shooting. Just drop the ISO, set your aperture to f/16 or f/22 and shoot pan-blurs. Hopefully you will get a few where the head of the pelican is sharp and the wings and ocean background are blurry. The keeper rate is low but the results can be worth it.

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A head throw, where your pelican stretches its throat and lifts its bill straight up in the air, are the most distinctive and amusing behaviors among these birds. It seems that most of the photographers I’ve talked with at the cliffs are keen to get a good shot of a pelican’s head throw. It’s not too hard, you’ll get it if you are willing to put in some time and stand ready. Any pelican that is standing and has its eyes open is a good candidate to throw its head back. I’ve seen a single individual do it five or six times in the course of just a few minutes. Head throws are as contagious as sneezes among a group of pelicans. If you see one do it be ready for his neighbor to do it too. Take a few test frames and check your histograms for blinkies ahead of time, so that it is simply a matter of framing it up when you see the pelican’s head drop down and back first, before being swung straight up in the air. Heck, with today’s ultra-fast motor drives and focusing systems, the camera practically takes the photo for you. Think about the right focal length for where you are standing. You’ll need to be wide enough to contain about twice the height of a standing pelican to include the entire bird when it is tossing its bill up.
Flat, flat, flat light. Love the flat light, that's why we shoot when the sun comes up. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 250, manual exposure mode, f/8 @ 1/800, 8:00am. [link]
Remember to shoot some details of the birds, but don’t approach them so closely that you spook them off to do so. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 400, manual exposure mode, f/8 @ 1/800, 8:15am. [link]

Outcroppings on which the pelicans perch range from the waterline to 30' - 50' above the water. Shots like the above are easiest when the pelicans are perched on the higher outcroppings. Give the pelicans space to land on the higher spots (i.e., not standing near the choice perches). Once a few pelicans land and begin the preen, others usually follow and the portrait opportunities improve with the numbers of birds. High tides and large surf both increase the likelihood of pelicans on the higher spots, since the lower perches will be awash, so plan around the tide tables if you have that luxury.
Canon 1Ds Mark III, 300mm f/4.0 lens, ISO 400, f/10 @ 1/800. [link]

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Get some frames of the groups, if you can line them up. Easiest to put the focus point off-center so that one focal animal is not static in the exact middle of the frame. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 200, manual exposure mode, f/5.6 @ 1/2000, 9:30am. [link]

Old men at the beach. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 320, manual exposure mode, f/11 @ 1/320, 9:00am. [link]
The bluff atop the La Jolla Cave is increasingly crowded with photographers (and visitors) each winter. When I would visit the cliffs after swimming the cove in the 80’s, I never saw another photographer there. In the 90’s there would be a few, and now it seems photographers, alone or in groups, are there most weekend mornings December through March. Between Christmas and New Years you will not be alone while shooting the pelicans. There are typically one or two photography tour groups that hit the cliffs in January, and it can get crowded on those mornings. I avoid visiting at these times. The attention may be a good thing, as these birds are deserving of our appreciation, and for the most part the behavior of photographers alongside whom I have shot at the cliffs has been exemplary and respectful of these special birds. However, if birds are disturbed and fly off, the photo opportunities for everyone are lessened (not to mention the disruption that the birds experience). I’ve seen a few people flush the entire flock, only to watch as all the departing birds settled on another cliff for the rest of the morning. I have also watched people stand at the far western edge of the bluff (where all the bird crap is) while pelicans wheel overhead looking for a place to land and rest in the morning sun. After the people step back a ways, within minutes the pelicans begin to land.

If the bluff top is not working for you, try walking down hill on the sidewalk to La Jolla Cove. As the sidewalk makes a left hand bend and widens a little, stop and wait a while. Chances are good that some pelicans will come by, at eye level and often quite close, for good flight shots.
You’ll want the longest lens you own for portraits and head throws. Some prefer to use shorter focal lengths and zooms (70-200, 100-400) for flight shots. Most of the better photos I have made the last six years at the cliffs were taken with a Canon 1Ds Mark II or 1DsIII and 500 f/4 IS, on a Gitzo tripod with a Wimberley II head. The perspective-crunching nature of a 500mm or 600mm, combined with the defocused background, is a combination I just love. A 70-200 f/2.8 or 300 f/2.8 is a good combo too, but I just don’t want to give up the clean pixels of the 1Ds bodies so I do not use crop bodies here. Prior to 2007 I shot all my flight shots with a 500 on the tripod. Lately, I have taken to handholding the 500 for flight shots and am getting more keepers that way. I have also found that my 300 f/2.8 produces great flight images, with less perspective compression than the 500 and sharper. The 300 is particularly good when there are many pelicans, and for those moments when they put the flaps down just before landing. I typically switch off with those two lenses, taking one of them on a given day and using the other next time. I don't carry two cameras but I know many photographers do, particularly those who are visiting and don't want to miss a single opportunity for lack of the right lens. Keep in mind that if there are onshore breezes and surf, you may get some spray on your gear even while you are well atop the cliffs. Consider bringing a towel in your hip sack just in case. Since I often shoot around surf I carry a full-length Aquatech spray cover for my camera and lens.

Mug shot. Side profile usually looks best, and typically results in sharp detail everywhere. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 w/ 1.4x II converter, ISO 200, f/8 @ 1/800. [link]
Blur. The keeper rate on this sort of shot is, for me, pretty low. I might find one in 100 that I find appealing. The key seems to be getting the head relatively sharp by carefully panning while allowing the rest of the bird to blur, for an abstract aesthetic. You too can shoot blurred images and, with the arrogance of a serious photographer, insist that they are "art". Canon 1Ds Mark II, 300mm f/2.8, ISO 250, Av with +1.0 compensation, f/4 @ 1/200, 580EX strobe with Better Beamer. I expose deliberately blurred images with at least one stop of positive (overexposure) compensation. I will also ding the bird with some strobe light (Better Beamer helps extend the throw of the strobe) to help freeze some edges, since the strobe effectively layers a high-shutter-speed image on top of the blurred, available light image. [link]

Sometimes California sea lions share the rocks with the pelicans. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 300 f/2.8, ISO 250, Av with +1.0 compensation, f/4.5 @ 1/200, 580EX strobe fill [link].

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When you first arrive, especially if you get there early, be sure to look around to the right at the cliffs themselves. They are typically covered with cormorants early in the morning. If the skies are clear, the cliffs will be both backlit and in shadow so a photograph looking that direction is tough. The only shot I have been happy with of the cormorants on the cliffs is before the sun crests Mt. Soledad, a long exposure with tripod. After the sun tops the hill the contrast just too extreme. As the morning goes on the cormorants tend to leave the cliffs and head off to sea to forage and then return again, in large groups, flying low over the water. It makes a neat photo as they glide low over the water, my skill is not enough to shoot sharp frozen flight shots on these very dark birds, so I just let them blur.

Canon 1Ds Mark II, 70-200 f/2.8 lens, ISO 50, Av with +0.3 compensation, 4 seconds @ f/16. [link]
Cormorants return to the cliffs after foraging on the ocean, flying low over the water on their approach. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 lens, ISO 50, Av with +0.3 compensation, 1/40 @ f/10. [link]
La Jolla Cliffs, cormorants, sea caves, pre-sunrise.  [link]
Had enough after a few hours at the cliffs? In addition to pelicans I have photographed gray whales, several species of cormorant, gull and tern, at least one osprey and a few great blue herons at the La Jolla cliffs. If you have seen enough of them too and you are ready to move on, there are a few fun places nearby you might want to consider. If there are waves, walking down the hill to the large grass park at La Jolla Cove may give you opportunities to shoot pelicans at water level flying above and in front of the waves. You’ll want to shoot from the sidewalk at the edge of the park, on the low bluff just above the waves. Children’s Pool (a pocket cove with seawall) is only a half mile south, just a two-minute drive, and your long lens is perfect to photograph the Pacific harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*) there. Walk down to the sand and shoot low for the best perspective of the seals. The sun reaches the seals at Children’s Pool later in the morning than it does the pelicans at the cliffs, so you can generally shoot both spots in good light in winter months. [Google map]

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*Harbor seal at the Children's Pool, just down the road from the La Jolla pelicans. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 500mm f/4 w/ 1.4x II converter, ISO 400, f/7.1 @ 1/800. Keep back from the seals. If you spook them into the water you might get a ticket and you will probably get an earfull from the seal activists. [link]*

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To the north, close enough that you can see both from the cliffs, lie Stephen Birch SIO Aquarium (10 minutes) and Torrey Pines State Reserve (20 minutes). Santee Lakes, a favorite of bird photographers, is only about 30 minutes away (provided you are not fighting morning traffic).

Beach cliffs at Torrey Pines State Reserve. Canon 1Ds Mark II, 24-70 f/2.8 lens, ISO 100, f/13 @ 1/10. From La Jolla drive north toward Del Mar on the N. Torrey Pines Road (aka, Coast Highway). Eventually you descend from Torrey Pines State Reserve mesa to the ocean on a mile long hill, which opens up at the bottom of the hill on the left to the ocean. You will see cars parked on the left (west) side of the Coast Highway, just yards from the surf, park there. Walk south on the beach for ¼ mile or more. If its low tide and late afternoon, you will have a view like the one above. Be sure to act bizarrely as you walk down the beach; this ensures that people stay away from you and out of your photograph. [link, Google map]
A Few Links

Below is a link to the best map I know of, showing the stretch of coast you will likely want to spend your time. Note that if you are driving into "old" La Jolla (e.g., Prospect Street and La Jolla Cove), you want to bear right where Coast Blvd branches off of Prospect. Coast Blvd becomes a one-way street at this point, and will take you downhill to the Cove, passing the prime pelican photography area on your right as you descend. You can clearly see the rocky cliffs in this Google map:

http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&hl=en&geocode=&time=&date=&ie=UTF8&t=h&om=1&ll=32.850223%2C-117.270593&spn=0.003551%2C0.007419&z=18

La Jolla Shores web cam (cliffs visible in the distance), courtesy Beach and Tennis Club

Scripps Pier web cam (not very helpful)

Surfline.com’s Scripps Pier surf cam, including tides, sunrise/set – to see what the skies are like at the cliffs.

How To Get There

I recently sent off an email to a fellow photographer who asked how to get there. Here's what I told him:

In this Google map:

http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&hl=en&geocode=&time=&date=&ie=UTF8&t=h&om=1&ll=32.850223%2C-117.270593&spn=0.003551%2C0.007419&z=18

you can see Coast Blvd, a one way street that passes the pelican spots, goes downhill to La Jolla Cove itself where it becomes two-way, and then continues along the water through La Jolla, soon passing the harbor seal spot named Children's Pool. Coast Blvd branches off of Prospect Street. You will take Coast Blvd. As it branches off Prospect, it will bend to the right and go down a hill. Almost immediately you want to look for a parking spot. There are 5-6 spots in a little pullout on the right, about 50 yards after the right-hand-bend you just passed. If one of those spots in the pullout is available, park there, otherwise park further down the hill and walk back up to the pullout.

Citation

The URL for this note is:

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