

CHILEAN FLAMINGO

Phylum: Chordata, Class: Aves, Order: Phoenicopteriformes, Family: Phoenicopteridae
Phoenicopus chilensis

Flamingos have been known to man for thousands of years, sometimes even worshipped. “The Egyptians used the flamingo as one of their hieroglyphic symbols to indicate the color red. They also regarded it as the living embodiment of the sun-god Ra...” (Ogilvie 5, 6). The Romans believed the flamingo tongue to be an exquisite delicacy.

Because they congregate in such great numbers, flamingos have been called ‘the most impressive and colourful of all bird spectacles’ (Brown 1973).

“Six different kinds of flamingo have been described and generally accepted” (Ogilvie 9). The six are: the Greater, Lesser, Caribbean, Chilean, Andean, and James’. The Greater flamingo has the widest distribution of all flamingos. It occurs from the Mediterranean, west down the coast of West Africa, and east from the Mediterranean through the southern part of the former Soviet Union, India, and East Africa. The Lesser flamingo is found in Africa south of the Sahara, and in India. The Chilean, Andean, and James’ all occur in South America. Of the three South American species, the Chilean is the most numerous and widespread.

Description: The Chilean flamingo is “very pale pink fading to white on the head, with long bright crimson feathers drooping over its back” (Ogilvie 54). It lacks yellow on the bill, and has prominent knee joints. These characteristics help distinguish it from the other two native South American species, the Andean and James’.

Height: 37 - 57 inches

Weight: male - 7.5 lbs., female - 6 lbs.

Lifespan: 25 - 60 years

Status: The Chilean Flamingo is currently not listed as endangered. However, there are problems in trying to estimate the numbers of the Chilean flamingo. Their range is very large and remote, spanning many national boundaries, making them difficult to follow and study. Therefore, accurate totals have not been reached.

Habitat: Primarily found on high-altitude lakes, but occasionally inhabit lowland areas.

Range: Central Peru to the extreme southern tip of South America, (over 2500 miles).

Diet: Filter feeders, feeding mainly on small invertebrates.

Social Organization & Behavior:

Flamingos usually congregate in very large groups on or near lakes. “There were 100,000 present on Lake Poopo in January 1972” (Ogilvie 56). Unlike most birds, and because they keep such large numbers, flamingos are more tolerant of encroachment on their nesting site. Only occasionally do they invest energy in threat displays.

Flamingos commonly stand on one leg, alternating every so often. The main reason they are thought to exhibit this behavior is comfort – just as humans tend to shift weight from side to side when standing for long periods of time. Keeping the leg and foot close to the body also helps keep them warm in cooler weather.

The flamingo has a goose-like voice and vocalizations may function in keeping the flock together (Kear 218).

Types of Displays:

- **Alert posture** - When disturbed suddenly, flamingos will give an “alert” posture in which they will raise their necks upward as high as they can.



- Hooking threat - This threat occurs when an intruder comes between a courting or incubating pair. The dominant male will stalk up to the stranger and extend the neck and point his head toward his own chest while ruffling his shoulder and back feathers.
- Neck-swaying threat - Although uncommon, this threat occurs when a bird approaches too closely to another's nest. The threatening bird brings its neck to the sides of its body at almost right angles while it spreads its scapulars and back feathers.

Courtship Displays:

- Head flagging - In "alert" posture, they "turn their heads from side to side in a quite rhythmic and jerky fashion, once or twice a second, while at the same time calling loudly and continuously" (Ogilvie 69).
- Wing salute - Generally following a head flagging, with the neck outstretched and head erect, the flamingo spreads its scapulars, showing its brightly colored feathers. This position is only held for 2-4 seconds at a time.
- Marching - This behavior usually involves a very large flock, sometimes over a thousand individuals. The birds pack together and then "set off at a fast run, abruptly reversing direction every so often" (Ogilvie 73). The under tail-coverts are spread and neck feathers raised while doing this, providing a much pinker appearance.

Special Features:

- Flamingos have long legs that allow them to wade further from shore than other wading birds.
- Flamingos have long necks to reach the bottom mud where the birds sift out their food.
- Webbed feet enable flamingos to support themselves while walking through mud, and also help them swim.
- The characteristic pink color comes from carotenoid pigments, which the birds acquire through feeding on algae, fungi, or bacteria. It also comes from the animals they eat that eat the same fungi, algae, and bacteria.
- Most birds have a larger, more robust upper bill that works against a smaller bill. The flamingo exhibits a reverse design. The upper bill acts as a "lid" to a large troughlike lower bill.
- Flamingos have a very unique and characteristic foraging behavior in which the bill is held upside-down under water. This makes it easier to scoop detritus. They have a system of horny plates along the sides of the upper and lower bill that screen food from the water. The large tongue acts as a piston, expelling water and food past the filtering devices. This system of feeding is very similar to that of a baleen whale.

Breeding and Care of Young:

- A typical nest is made out of mud, and is around 12 -16 inches tall, 16 -20 inches wide at the base, with a very shallow depression at the top in which the eggs are laid.
- Flocks synchronize their time of nesting, so young grow up together and form large groups. The young can begin flying at 3 months of age.
- They nest in huge colonies and seldom breed in flocks smaller than 10 pairs.
- The male and female both help in building the nest.
- Only 1 egg is laid, and both the male and female take turns incubating it.
- Incubation lasts from 28 - 30 days.
- The chick remains in the nest for 5 - 8 days after hatching. Chicks are covered with gray down feathers when born. "Juveniles in first plumage are gray and brown with pink markings. It takes 2 to 3 years to lose all of the gray" (Houston Zoo website, 6/99). The chicks are born with relatively straight bills that don't start curving down for about 14 days, even then the filter feeding system isn't completely developed.
- Parents continue to feed young up until fledging (about 75 days). Instead of bringing food back to the nest, flamingos secrete a blood-red drool from the glands in their throats and digestive tracts that contain a mixture of fat, red-blood cells, and pigment that helps turn the feathers pink (Benyus 176).
- Most flamingos begin mating at 6 years of age, although successful breeding doesn't occur until 7 or 8 years of age.

