



LIME
WONDERFUL
WILDLIFE

The pink colour of flamingos is beta carotene absorbed from the small animals they eat

NATURE

FOCUS ON...

Fabulous flamingos!

The pretty-in-pink bird is one of the Caribbean's most charismatic – and is now starting to thrive here again

Few birds can transport you to the tropics quite like the flamingo. This distinctive bird is synonymous with blue skies and sunshine, and is a sight to behold, especially in large flocks. The black on the end of its bill and tips of its flight feathers contrasts with the deep rosy pink of the rest of the body. Standing almost 1.5m tall, its long legs and equally long curved neck

gives this bird a surreal elegance. With a unique shape and pink colour, it is no wonder that flamingos are so celebrated.

There are six species of flamingo across the globe but only one occurs naturally in the Caribbean: the American Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*). On some islands such as Inagua in the Bahamas, the American Flamingo

population is as large as 60,000 individuals. However, this was not always the case. In the middle of the 20th century, some flamingo populations across the Caribbean region were dramatically lower, even in areas where they had once been abundant. Inagua, as well as many other islands, has seen a resurgence of flamingos, thanks to targeted conservation efforts.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

In order to protect and support flamingo populations, it is essential to understand their natural history. Every feature that

makes a flamingo unique – its long legs and neck, curved beak, even that pink colour – is related to its food. Flamingos wade through water, skimming the mud and silt at the bottom for brine shrimp, algae, small crustaceans and larvae. They are filter feeders, with hair-like structures on the bill that work as a strainer to trap their prey.

The small plants and animals that make up their diet are rich in beta carotene, a natural pigment, which is absorbed and deposited in the feathers, giving rise to that famous pink colour.

Flamingos thrive in shallow water and areas of high salinity – the best places to find both their favourite foods and mud, which a flamingo needs to build a nest. Males and females use mud (along with some other natural materials) to create a mound about 50cm tall, which looks like a miniature volcano. The female will lay her single egg in this mound, where the chick will spend the first two weeks of its life after hatching.

CONSERVATION SUCCESSES

The American Flamingo is the national bird of the Bahamas, but if you visited the now-famous flamingo stronghold of Inagua 70 years ago, you would have had a difficult time seeing even a few hundred birds – as ornithologist Robert Porter Allen (the first Director of Research for the National Audubon Society) discovered when he visited in 1952. He worked with Bahamian conservationists to form a protection league, complete with a full-time flamingo warden. Incredibly, over the next ten years

the government of the Bahamas designated almost half of Inagua as a national park. In the decades that followed, birdlife blossomed there and the flamingo population recovered. Inagua now supports the largest breeding colony of American Flamingos in the world.

Historically, the British Virgin Islands also hosted tens of thousands of flamingos. Similar to the Inagua story, by the mid 20th century they were gone. In 1992, a collaborative effort involving researchers and conservationists reintroduced flamingos to the islands of Anegada and Guana. The effort was a success, and today hundreds of flamingos live and breed on the islands.

Recently, American Flamingos have been turning up across the Caribbean in places where they haven't been seen in years – certainly not with any consistency. A handful have appeared in Caroni Swamp and the mudflats of Orange Valley on Trinidad, and a lone bird has started regularly visiting Anguilla. This year, a pair was confirmed on Sint Maarten/St Martin, an

island with excellent salt-pond habitats. These observations are encouraging, suggesting that the flamingos may be recolonising parts of their historic range.

FINE FEATHERED FRIENDS

But why did flamingo populations decline? Historically, these birds were killed for their meat and beautiful feathers. Hunting wasn't limited to adult birds. Because of their synchronous breeding behaviour, chicks from all nests hatch around the same time, and colonies would be raided for the young birds, which were considered the most succulent. While hunting pressure has decreased, it is not completely absent, and flamingos today still face the threat of poaching.

There are also other contemporary threats to modern flamingo populations. Habitat destruction and climate change (including severe drought and increased storms) can have devastating effects on even the

most robust flamingo colonies. For example, hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017 probably killed thousands of flamingos.

Though we cannot stop storms, we can protect the essential habitats that flamingos need for foraging and breeding – areas that are critically important after such extreme natural disasters. On Bonaire, the Cargill Salt Ponds, which represent another important breeding area for the American

Flamingo, was designated as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network Site of Regional Importance. The goal of these sites is to create a network of protected key habitats throughout the Americas to sustain healthy populations of shorebirds. Flamingos are not technically shorebirds (though they occur on shores), but the protection of this site is essential to the persistence of American Flamingo in the region.

Next time you are lucky enough to see an American Flamingo, remember the story of these fascinating creatures. Half a century ago, a sighting would have been unlikely because of the impacts of humans. Today, also because of human intervention, flamingo populations are rebounding across the region. We hope that in future the American Flamingo can be enjoyed across the Caribbean.

Did you know? The flamingo's long legs and neck, curved beak and pink colour are all linked to its food

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Flamingos make loud honks while flying in large flocks

ASLAM IBRAHIM CASTELLÓN MAURE - BITÁCORA

FEATHERY FACTS

AMERICAN FLAMINGO

Height: 120-145cm

Body weight: 2.8kg (males), 2.2kg (females)

Wing length: 90cm-1.5m

Sociability: Forms large colonies of tens or hundreds of thousands of individuals

Vocalisation: Similar to geese – makes a honking sound while flying and on the ground, and



Young flamingos gradually turn pink as they age

BAHAMAS NATIONAL TRUST

produces a low gabbling noise during feeding

Courtship: Only fully coloured adults breed (aged 3-6 years), forming long-term pair bonds that last for several breeding seasons. Breeding season varies by population

Longevity: Wild lifespan unknown; flamingos have lived for over 60 years in captivity