

# Caribbean Flamingo

*Phoenicopterus ruber*

Bird

## Scientific Name

*Phoenicopterus ruber*

## Other Names

American flamingo

## Range

The north coast of South America, the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and a number of Caribbean islands. Current research suggests that Caribbean flamingos may also be native to Florida.

## Habitat

Shallow salt lagoons, soda lakes and coastal mudflats

## Description

A large pink bird with long legs and neck. Color can vary, with neck and wings more vibrant. Flight feathers are black, feet and legs grey and tip of the pale, curved bill is black. Females are slightly smaller than males.

## Average Size

Length: 40 - 48 inches

Weight: 6 – 8 pounds

Wingspan: Up to 5 feet

## Lifespan:

In the wild: 40+ years

In human care: 40+ years

## Diet

In the wild: Algae, diatoms, protozoans, small worms, mollusks, crustaceans, aquatic plants and insect larvae

In the zoo: Flamingo fare and lake vegetation

## Clutch Size

One egg

## Incubation

28 – 30 days

## Fledging Period

75 days

## Sexual Maturity

2 – 6 years

## Predators

Carnivores and birds of prey (for the chicks only)

## Population Status

Vulnerable



## Behavior

Flamingos are highly gregarious and live in large, noisy flocks, making a wide variety of vocalizations that includes honks and barks. In the wild, they feed mostly at night, but in human care they can be seen feeding all around the clock. They move their webbed feet in place to stir up small animals that are living in the murky, muddy water before putting their large, curved bill upside down in the water. They use their tongue to pump water in and out of their beak, letting the large comb-like ridges strain food particles from the water as they swish their heads from side to side.

Flamingos are strong flyers, reaching speeds of up to 35 miles per hour, but the takeoff can be labored and awkward as they run along the shallows gaining momentum for flight. During flight, a flamingo's neck and feet are stretched straight out, creating a very distinct image in the sky. Although they are most often seen walking or wading in the water, flamingos can swim very well in deep water.

## Reproduction and Breeding

The flamingo's courtship usually begins in winter and can last for weeks or months. Sexual and social behavior are closely associated in flamingos as the displays which precede breeding are performed in large groups. Synchronized head-turning, marching and wing-stretching are all typical. This helps with the synchronization of breeding, ensuring that all birds breed when environmental conditions are most favorable. Predation of eggs and chicks is lower than if breeding was spread out over a longer period.

Finally, the birds pair off and begin mating with most breeding occurring during nest-building. The nest is a mud cone up to two feet high with a dish-like top to hold the egg. Both parents incubate the egg. For the first few weeks, the parents feed the chick "crop milk", a glandular secretion that is rich in carotenoid pigment. This is the same pigment that gives the adult birds their pink coloration. Since most of the pigment available goes to the chick, little is left to color the adults' new feathers, leaving the parents a pale pink. The downy, grey chick is able to run and swim after a few days and will begin to forage on its own at about 2 weeks of age but will receive partial feedings from its parents until fledging.



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### Conservation

The Caribbean Flamingo is considered an animal of Least Concern by the IUCN (The International Union for Conservation of Nature), but they do receive some protection being listed on appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). Loss of habitat, most specifically draining of lagoons and marshes, has had the most negative effect on flamingo populations throughout the world.

Although the overall populations of the Caribbean flamingo are increasing, there are only four main breeding colonies of the species in the wild. One hundred years ago, there were close to fifty.

### Fun Facts

Flamingos have very tough skin on their legs which protects them from the chemical makeup of the extremely alkaline soda and salt lagoons.

Flamingos are an ancient group of birds. According to fossil evidence, they date back 10 million years.

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