

Holy Flamingo!

By Kay Cramer

There has been a buzz of excitement in birding circles about the newest wave of rarities to land in Pennsylvania—American flamingos!

In the wake of Hurricane Idalia at the end of August, more than 150 flamingos were found in states north of Florida. It is thought that they were flying between Cuba and Mexico when the hurricane blew them off course. Besides Pennsylvania, they have been spotted in Alabama, North and South Carolina, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Virginia and Texas.

Two flamingos were sighted in Pennsylvania September 5th at a large pond in Franklin County west of Chambersburg, drawing crowds to see them. On the 10th, people watched in horror as one of the birds was attacked and injured by a snapping turtle. The injured bird was taken to Raven Ridge Wildlife Center in Washington Boro, PA, on September 11th, where it underwent surgery and supportive care. Unfortunately, it died during transport to a more permanent location, to the sorrow of its admirers. The remaining flamingo stayed for over a week more, then was seen flying away to the south on September 19th.

Flamingos are beautiful birds, with yellow eyes, curved pink and black bills, and pale to bright pink feathers. Their feathers were nearly their undoing.

Until the late 1800s they were found in flocks of thousands in the Everglades and in other large salt and freshwater lagoons and marshes in Florida. The late 19th century saw a fashion rage for putting feathers from all kinds of birds onto women's hats, fans and dresses. The wading birds, such as egrets and herons, have beautiful breeding plumage, and suffered losses that almost wiped them out. Florida Audubon's Jerry Lorenz of the Everglades Science Center estimates that numbers of flamingos decreased by 80-95% in Florida under relentless hunting and from the degradation of the Everglades itself.

Passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, which made it a crime to kill or possess any part of a migratory bird, and continuing efforts to restore the Everglades, have brought flamingos back to Florida (though not usually to Pennsylvania!).

A few flamingo facts:

- The intensity of the flamingos' pink feathers depends on the quality of their diet. They eat insects, beta carotene-containing crustaceans like brine shrimp, plants and algae. The American flamingo is the pinkest of the six flamingo species found worldwide.
- Flamingos eat with their heads upside down. They stir up the water with their webbed feet, then suck it in with their curved bills. They filter it out through sieve-like lamellae on their bills, leaving the food behind.
- Flocks (or "flamboyances") of flamingos perform a very strange group dance ritual to stimulate breeding hormone production. This weird behavior allows synchronized egg production when the water levels are appropriate. Check out this YouTube video: https://youtu.be/QLV_K7DVeyU?feature=shared
- When flamingos have chosen a mate, they stick together so long as they produce young. They build a hill-like mud nest and usually have one chick. The chicks are grey with straight bills and black eyes. Flamingos feed their chicks crop milk, a dark pink substance high in protein and fat. As adults feed the crop milk, their own color fades, to be restored after the chicks are independent.
- The long legs of flamingos allow them to wade in deep lagoons and estuaries. Although it looks like flamingos have backwards-bending legs, their legs bend at the ankle, not the knee (which is high up in the feathers of the leg). Flamingos can rest on one leg for hours. No one is sure why they do this.

- Flamingos travel in large flocks. Getting aloft to fly is hard and they run along the top of the water, aided by their webbed toes. In flight, they stretch out their necks in front and legs behind for improved aerodynamics.
- Final fun fact: Flamingo tongue was a Roman delicacy!

Birders have been known to travel hours to view a rare bird. We were lucky to see something as exotic as a flamingo only two hours away. Experts rightly predicted that the Pennsylvania flamingos would head south when the weather cooled, but for 2 weeks, this one gave us quite a show!

Photos:

1. Flamingo Heart, APA 2021 by Betty Wills
2. Flamingo in Flight, Michael Anderson, M. Anderson Photography
3. Flamingo at Dusk, Michael Anderson, M. Anderson Photography

