

Flamingoes¹



Photos by Flavio Ecardi

The American or Caribbean pink flamingo is one of the oldest species of birds, as well as one of those humans find most attractive. Their color and size and the fact that they always move in a group have made them participants in a spectacle of nature that Man has not wanted to miss.

In Mexico, they live on the coasts of the Yucatán Peninsula, where large coastal lagoons called *rías* abound, as well as in the marshes and mangroves that separate dry land from the beach. Their main

feeding grounds are in the northern coast of the state of Yucatán, in Los Petenes, Campeche, on the southern end of Filobobos Island, in Quintana Roo, and even in the middle of the Sian Ka'an Preserve.

Unfortunately, this magnificent water fowl is endangered for many reasons: human expansion toward its habitat has transformed *rías* and mangroves, severely perturbing its way of life. For example, not a few young flamingoes are injured when they hit high tension wires when flying from one area to another.

The flamingo is a gregarious bird; throughout its life cycle, when it nests, feeds or flies, it does everything in large groups. They are seriously affected by predators and other disturbances caused by either nature or Man. For example, any alteration to the colonies where they nest can create stress in the parents, who may abandon the nest itself and the colony for several seasons.

Reproduction of the species is also affected by the fact that flamingo eggs are in demand for human consumption.



Many more are lost due to flooding or the activities of predators like bobcats who, given the slightest chance, will steal the eggs from the nests.

Man, for his part, has made a tourist attraction out of watching pink flamingoes feeding or flying over coastal lagoons, and tourists do not hesitate to travel hours to see them. This has had negative consequences for the birds. The passage of boats, the noise they make and the fact that people even deliberately frighten them so they take flight and can be photographed and filmed are some of the causes of their reduced feeding.

In addition, the boats' passing makes vegetation break loose from the bottom of the lagoons, destroying basic organisms the flamingoes feed on. The reduction of algae and sea grass also reduces the number of flamingoes per group, and the population as a whole scatters. This then influences how they use their energy: now they must expend more energy in looking for food and less in reproduction.

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Man, one of the greatest threats to the survival of these birds, could become their greatest protector. In Mexico there is great interest in conserving the areas inhabited by flamingoes. The government has made several decrees aimed at protecting their habitat, which have resulted in a noticeable increase in their number. Currently, the flamingo population has stabilized; however, monitoring of it should continue, as should protection of nesting grounds, and environmental education for children and adults, as well as awareness campaigns for industrialists, politicians and the people who work in nesting areas about the importance of protecting their habitat. This is necessary if we want to continue to enjoy the spectacle of a haughty procession of flamingoes going through the *riás* or flying over Mexico's tidelands, painting the sky pink. ■■

NOTES

¹ Information taken from the bimonthly bulletin of the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity, *Biodiversitas*, no. 15 (October 1997), pp. 1-7.