

THE LESSER FLAMINGOS OF KIMBERLEY



Distribution and movements

The Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* is fairly widely distributed across Africa, especially in southern and East Africa, and also occurs in India and Pakistan. Across this range, it is associated with open, nutrient-rich shallow wetlands. It occurs in large flocks, and tens of thousands of birds are often found together at a large lake or pan. Lesser Flamingos usually travel at night, at an average speed of about 60 kilometres/hour.

Breeding

For a species with a population that numbers 1.5–2.5 million individuals, it is remarkable that until recently only six global breeding sites were known for Lesser Flamingos: four in Africa and two in India.



In Africa it breeds at Etosha Pan (Namibia), Sua Pan (Botswana), Lake Natron (Tanzania) and, since 2007, Kamfers Dam near Kimberley in South Africa.

Breeding usually takes place during the summer months (October – April), and only when the ephemeral wetlands are flooded. The breeding areas, which consist of aggregations of mud nest turrets, are usually some distance from the mainland and thus isolated and protected from terrestrial predators.



Aerial predators, such as Marabou Storks, Lappet-faced Vultures and eagles, catch chicks and adults at the breeding areas, and constant harassment can lead to the colony being abandoned. A single egg (rarely two) is laid on the nest turret, and then incubated for about 28 days by both parents. The chicks eat their own egg shells shortly after hatching and leave the nest about six days later to join a crèche of similarly aged chicks.



The adults feed the chicks a secretion (crop milk), which is produced in the upper parts of the digestive tract. The chicks undertake their first flight when they are 70 to 90 days old.



Feeding

The Lesser Flamingo feeds both during the day and night. It wades through the shallow water, sometimes swimming in deeper water, with its bill upside down, filtering blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) from the surface and diatoms from the bottom layer. Its large tongue pumps water into and out of the mouth, using the lamellae (bony plates with gills) in the bill to filter out the food.



Threats and challenges

The Lesser Flamingo is categorised as *Near Threatened* globally and in South Africa. The population decline in southern Africa has been attributed to poor recruitment because

of infrequent breeding at Etosha Pan and Sua Pan, and anthropogenic threats at the breeding sites. Such human-induced threats include soda-ash and salt mining, damming of rivers in catchment areas, collision with fences and telephone and electricity lines, disturbance by low-flying aircraft, pollution of wetlands, and inappropriate developments adjacent to breeding areas. Mass die-offs of Lesser Flamingos occasionally occur on the shallow saline lakes in Kenya and Tanzania, during which tens of thousands die. The reasons for these mortality events are not known, but suggestions include poisoning by heavy metals or by the toxins produced by cyanobacteria, and tuberculosis or other diseases.



Kamfers Dam, just north of Kimberley, is the species' newest breeding site. A large, S-shaped island was built for breeding in 2006, and 9 000, 13 000 and 1 800 chicks were raised on this island in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively.

The now internationally important Kamfers Dam has been in the public eye, not only for the significance of its breeding events, but for the controversies surrounding the probable negative effects on the breeding flamingos of poor water quality, rising water levels and a proposed massive housing development near the western shoreline. Unfortunately rising water levels resulted in the total flooding of the island in 2010. Once the water level has been stabilised through the pumping of treated sewage effluent to another pan and/or the Vaal River, the breeding island will be rebuilt.



For more information on Lesser Flamingos visit:

- The Save the Flamingo Association website (www.savetheflamingo.co.za).
- The IUCN SSG Flamingo Specialist Group Flamingo Resources website (www.flamingoresources.org).