

Displaced American Flamingos

By Rebecca Bracken

I recently traveled down to Port Aransas in search of a rare and uniquely pink bird, the American Flamingo. If you're a bird nerd like me, you may remember that back in fall 2023 there was an explosion of flamingos in the US. They appeared up north, in places like Wisconsin and Ohio as well as numerous states along the east coast.

These birds moved to unexpected places because Hurricane Idalia hit Florida, disrupting their normal feeding and breeding grounds. Hundreds, if not thousands, of birders flocked to each sighting to spot the birds. But what makes flamingos so intriguing and why are they showing up in weird places?

The American Flamingo is commonly found in the Caribbean and along the northern coast of South America. Historically, it was found throughout Florida, but it was largely extirpated by the early 1900s. The American Flamingo is the largest of the four flamingo species in the Americas, followed by the Chilean, Andean, and James's Flamingos.

Most people recognize flamingos because of their bright pink hue, which comes from the aqueous bacteria and beta-carotene in their food supply, normally brine shrimp, mollusks and crustaceans, and small insects. Young birds are gray and even adults can be gray if they are unhealthy or malnourished.

They have some other interesting characteristics, including legs that appear to bend backwards when walking! This is because the middle joint on their legs is actually their ankle, not the knee. They also have webbed feet that they use to stamp in the mud to stir up food. Their bills are adapted to separate their food from the gathered mud and silt, which they filter out through hairy structures called lamellae.

Flamingos are social birds, often living in colonies that number in the thousands! Living in colonies provides protection from predators, helps them maximize food intake, and use scarce nesting sites efficiently. Flamingos use ritual displays before breeding, and often have synchronous nesting.

After chicks hatch, adults feed the chicks a kind of crop milk that contains fat and protein, but no carbohydrates. When chicks are about two weeks old, they congregate in groups called microcrèches and eventually crèches that contain thousands of chicks. Chicks remain in these crèches until they are able to fly, sometime around three and a half months of age.

Currently, there are about 80,000-90,000 American Flamingos remaining in the wild. With so few remaining in the US, birders jumped at the opportunity to see one in their home state when more than 150 flamingos ended up spread across the country.

The question in the mind of many researchers was if these birds would stay in non-traditional areas. In Florida, the answer appears to be yes. Biologists found around a hundred flamingos there this winter. In other states, the answer is less clear. For most of the flamingos, their fate is unknown. Many experts believe that most of the flamingos headed south as soon as they could, particularly once the breeding season began.

We had several flamingos in Galveston, but sadly I didn't get the chance to go see them! So, when one popped up in Port Aransas the other week, I joined some friends on a road trip down there to find it. If

you haven't had the opportunity to see a flamingo yet, now is the time. And if you miss it, don't worry, just wait for the next storm to blow one by.

Photo by Lip Kee

Caption: American Flamingo