



Chilean Flamingo

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Aves
 Order: Ciconiiformes
 Family: Phoenicopteridae
 Genus: *Phoenicopus*
 Species: *chilensis*



Photo courtesy of Kelley Zylstra

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Chilean flamingos are found in South America in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru, with some wintering in Uruguay and Brazil. They live at elevations of up to 15,000 feet above sea level, and inhabit coastal mudflats, estuaries, lagoons, and salt-lakes. The Chilean flamingo is scarce or absent in lakes with fish to avoid competition for food.
- **Exhibit Location:** Waterfowl Pond

Characteristics

- Chilean flamingos are 4-5 feet tall and weigh approximately 5-7 pounds. The Chilean species is smaller and paler than most of its relatives.
- Chilean flamingos are pale pink in color, with darker pink and black flight feathers. They have dull yellow or yellow-gray legs that have pink bands at the joints and pink webbed feet. They have long slim necks and extremely long, slender legs.
- The bill is bent downward in the middle and is part white and part black. Its tongue is covered with bristle-like projections that help filter water and food particles through special structures in the bill.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** Up to 50 years; **In Captivity:** about 40 years

Behaviors

- Chilean flamingos are very social and live in flocks usually numbering in the thousands. Colonies of a few individuals are rare, while colonies of tens of thousands of birds are common. The large group is their main defense against predators.
- Chilean flamingos spend most of the day feeding, preening (waterproofing their feathers by distributing oil from a gland at the base of their tail with their bill), resting, and bathing. They also devote considerable time to collective displays before, during, and after breeding.
- When in large groups, Chilean flamingos can be quite loud, and make deep, honking noises along with other vocalizations, such as grunting and howling. These may be important for parent-chick recognition and for keeping flocks together.
- Chilean flamingos have good eyesight and a good sense of hearing, but poorly developed senses of taste and smell, as common in birds.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** toys in water, live fish

Reproduction

- Chilean flamingos reach sexual maturity at 6 years of age. They usually form new pairs each season.
- Chilean flamingos require breeding habitats with suitable salt level and islands with extensive surrounding mudflats and shallow water.
- Flamingos are very social when assembled in nesting areas, and nests are usually built 2 nest-lengths apart. The courtship displays are quite elaborate, and males and females perform various head and wing movements that look similar to everyday preening, but are much more rigid.
- Flamingos make their nests by piling mud and forming it into a large mound about 15 inches in diameter and 1-2 feet tall. The mound serves as protection from heat and flooding that occurs at ground level.

They make an indentation on the top of the mound where the female lays her single egg. Incubation lasts about 30 days, and both parents sit on the egg.

- When it hatches, the chick is covered with gray or white downy feathers. Its bill is straight at birth so that the parents can feed the chick by regurgitation, and it curves after a few months. Chicks grow to their adult plumage after about 2 years.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** algae, diatoms, brine flies, shrimp, mollusks, insects, small fishes, crustaceans, larvae
- **At the Zoo:** Mazuri flamingo food

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Near Threatened; **CITES Appendix:** II
- There has been a reduction in the number of Chilean flamingos due to habitat loss and degradation, harvesting, and human disturbance. No more than 200,000 individuals exist in the wild.
- Humans are the main threat to Chilean flamingos due to either direct misuse or elimination of habitats or from indirect damage such as changing land characteristics, like changes in water level. For example, the important Mar Chiquita breeding site is threatened by diversion of water for irrigation projects. Birds bred in only 9 of the 26 years up to 1999 at this site due to poor breeding conditions there.
- Predators: Marabou Stork, Tawny Eagle, vultures, pythons, feral pigs, humans

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The Chilean flamingo's pink coloring comes from a carotenoid pigment consumed through its food. In most captive populations this pink color must be artificially added to the diet, or else these birds would appear a significantly duller color.
- Flamingos belong to one of the oldest bird groups alive. Their fossil records date back to the Miocene period about 10 million years ago.
- The bill is adapted for its unique feeding method. It is held upside down in the water and moved back and forth so the minute organisms are filtered out by the bill's special hair-like adaptations, essentially working like a sieve.
- The pink knob at the center of the leg is often mistaken for the knee, but it is in fact the ankle.

Sources:

- Busch Entertainment Corporation, Chilean flamingo. Retrieved October 27, 2006, from SeaWorld/Busch Gardens ANIMALS Web site: <http://www.seaworld.org/animal-info/animal-bytes/animalia/eumetazoa/coelomates/deuterostomes/chordata/craniata/aves/ciconiiformes/chilean-flamingo.htm>
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- Phoenix Zoo (2006). Chilean flamingo phoenicopterus chilensis. Retrieved October 25, 2006. Web site: http://www.phoenixzoo.org/learn/animals/animal_detail.aspx?FACT_SHEET_ID=100009
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