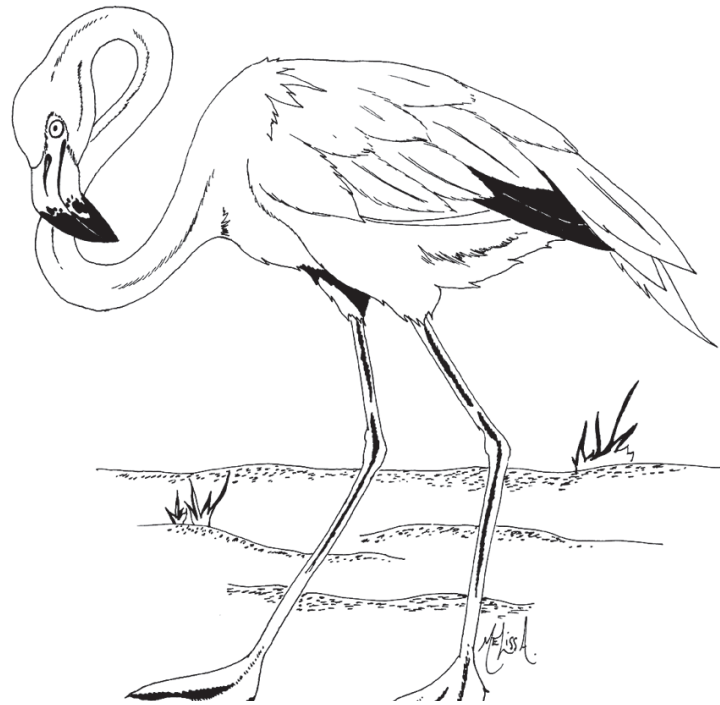




Endangered Species of The Bahamas



Artwork by Melissa Maura

WEST INDIAN FLAMINGO

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Phoenicopterus ruber

DESCRIPTION

The West Indian Flamingo is hardly one to be confused with other birds. Its long legs, long neck and characteristic pink colour make these birds like no other. The West Indian Flamingo has a large, heavy, down curved bill that is most often described by the layperson as "strange". Adults are usually about four feet tall.

DIET

The larvae of the salt marsh fly is one of the major constituents of the diet of West Indian Flamingos. They also eat brine shrimp, small snails as well as other forms of animal and vegetable life so small that they can scarcely be seen without the aid of a microscope! Although small in size, this food is rich in carotene which gives Flamingos their characteristic colour. Flamingos stir up their food from shallow water and separate it from the mud and water by pumping and straining it through their bill. They are the only birds which feed with their bill upside down!

REPRODUCTION

Flamingo breeding activity usually begins in early March when huge flocks gather and engage in elaborate and loud courtship ceremonies. This is almost like a very large dance - the massed birds prance around shoulder to shoulder, long necks waving and twisting this way and that, and a thousand voices setting up a fearful hue and cry. The chorus of courting birds can be heard miles away. When it is all over the pairs are formed and the building of the nest mounds begins usually around April. Nests are

built on the ground out of mud and are baked hard by the sun. The nest which resembles small volcanoes, can be from a few inches high to sometimes over two feet high a shallow crater at the top. This is where the single egg is deposited. Flamingos lay one white egg that is about twice the size of a hen's egg. Both parents share in incubation which takes about one month. Flamingo chicks look nothing like their parents. They are covered with a thick coat of white down and have pink bills and feet. Both parents feed the chick "flamingo milk" - a red secretion from the throat of the adult birds. When they are about 30 days old the chicks have changed to a dark gray down and start to feed themselves but still eat from their parents if they can.

HABITAT

Even though the Flamingo is a strong flier, it is really quite shy and prefers to live in remote and lonely places. Usually these are rather desert-like spots, dry islands and shorelines where salt is made, and where few other creatures can survive. The island of Great Inagua fits that portfolio perfectly. This is where the majority of West Indian Flamingos are found in The Bahamas. The flock breeds around Lake Windsor (Rosa) which lies within the boundaries of Inagua National Park.

STATUS

In the 1950's it was thought that the West Indian Flamingo might become extinct in The Bahamas because their numbers were so few. With the help of the National Audubon Society in the United States, the creation of the Bahamas National Trust and the appointment of park wardens, the Inagua population has grown to approximately 50,000 - a true conservation success story. Even though their numbers are impressive, the West Indian Flamingo is an endangered species. It is illegal to harm or capture this bird under the Bahamas Wild Bird (Protection) Act. The Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) lists the West Indian Flamingo in Appendix II which means that they are threatened and stand to become endangered.

THREATS

Natural threats: Building nests directly on the ground make Flamingos vulnerable to a number of predators. The eggs can be trampled by wild donkeys and boar that roam freely in the same area where Flamingos live and nest.

Hunting: Although Flamingo meat is eaten in other Caribbean countries, it is illegal to harm, capture or kill the Flamingo in The Bahamas.

Historical threats: The Flamingo was hunted for its big, pink feathers that were used to decorate hats and other nonessential items. Low flying planes of World War II over Andros wreaked havoc on the Flamingo population. This noisy disturbance drove these shy birds away- so much so that their return was doubtful.

INTERESTING FACTS

- The Flamingo is the national bird of The Bahamas
- During late summer, autumn and winter the Flamingos fly off to other islands such as Cuba and Hispaniola and the northern Bahama islands of Abaco and Andros.



Text adapted from West Indian Flamingo by Robert Porter Allen

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