



THE FLORIDIAN FLAMINGO

BY DR. RUSCENA WIEDERHOLT

**YOU'VE SEEN THEM EVERYWHERE
ADORNING FLOWER BEDS AND POOLS, GRACING NEON SIGNS
AND GLASSES, PEEKING OUT FROM DRESSES AND SHIRTS
THE ICON OF THE TROPICS**

The mere mention of this wading bird conjures up images of white sand beaches and aqua blue water. While flamingo depictions have never strayed far from Florida, the history of the actual, living species is a different story. Bright pink, the American flamingo rivals only the Roseate spoonbill for its exuberant plumage. More than just a flashy cover, their plumage reveals their beta carotene and pigment rich diet of algae, plants, fish, insects, crustaceans and invertebrates. Easy to spot, foolproof to identify, it should be impossible to lose track of birds like that. So, we'd think.

Swirling among these festive pink feathers has been no small amount of confusion and controversy, as flamingo sightings have been

recorded in Florida since the 1950s. Of real birds, not the ones floating in your neighbor's pool. But for decades, the enduring question was where did they come from? Were these birds actually native to Florida or merely transients from nearby Caribbean colonies? After all, American flamingos are found across the Caribbean, to the Yucatan peninsula and northern South America, predominantly in mudflats, inland lakes and lagoons in estuarine or coastal areas. They can disperse long-distances, so perhaps they were just another visitor come to enjoy Florida's sunshine and endless beaches. Or maybe they hadn't traveled at all.

For a long time, sightings of flamingos were dismissed as escapees from captive populations,

especially the one in Hialeah. In 1931, Joseph Widener, a wealthy Philadelphian art collector, had just purchased the Hialeah racetrack. He imported 20 to 30 flamingos from Cuba for the grounds. They promptly flew away the next day. Undaunted, he imported more, and this time they stayed. Charming the public with their good looks, not long after the Florida Derby was renamed the

Flamingo Stakes. Winston Churchill is alleged to have painted their portrait while visiting Miami in the 40s. Miami Vice and several movies captured the flock on screen, and the charismatic flamingo was cast on the Florida lottery ticket. The flock remains today, and it was long believed that its famous individuals were the source of the mysterious flamingo sightings.

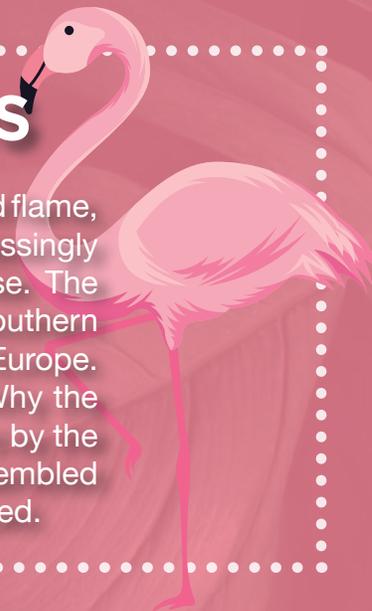
HOW DID THEY GET HERE?

These questions came to head in 2015 when a juvenile flamingo was discovered in Florida Bay. Hoping to find an answer once and for all, a group of researchers working at Zoo Miami and Audubon painstakingly captured him, attached a satellite tracker to his leg, and affectionately named him Conchy. They released him and waited, eagerly, to see where he would fly: Cuba, the Bahamas or Mexico? Instead, in classic teenager style, Conchy refused any of the above, and stayed in Florida Bay. One more piece was added to the puzzle. Determined, the researchers set out to solve the mystery, and their results came out last summer to much acclaim: flamingos are Floridian after all.

Flocks of American flamingos were once abundant in Florida and the Florida Keys. Before 1900, observations of flocks in the thousands were recorded in field notes and journals. Fragile pieces of paper miraculously surviving the test of time to be digitized and discovered by the team of scientists. But not all sightings were innocuous, some of these birdwatchers were also plume hunters. The flamingo's beautiful feathers were sought to embellish women's hats, and they were also hunted for food. In one account, more than one hundred flamingos were killed in a day. They followed the fate of many other eye-catching birds in Florida, massive declines. By the turn of the century, they were no longer found in Florida.

GYPSIES, DANCES AND FLAMINGOS

The flamingo's name, derived from Spanish and Portuguese, has its origin in the word flame, just like flamboyant, appropriate for such a showy species. If you've ever embarrassingly referred to a Spanish dance as flamingo like I have, you're actually pretty close. The Spanish word, flamenco, refers to both the bird and the dance, both hailing from southern Spain. The Greater Flamingo, one of six flamingo species, is found in southern Europe. Gypsies are credited with creating the dance and were also called flamencos. Why the two are associated together is a bit of a mystery. Perhaps the dance was inspired by the elegant movements of the flamingo? Or the brightly colored flamenco dancers resembled their avian counterparts? At the moment, this is one question that remains unsolved.





WERE THEY BREEDING IN FLORIDA?

Another important clarification for flamingo's status is whether they actually bred here in Florida. Here the evidence is scant, but among jars of preserved snakes, shelves of skulls and drawers of stuffed songbirds, we find a refreshing sign of life, eggs. Flamingo eggs to be exact, preserved since the late 1800s in Natural History and Vertebrate Zoology Museums. Scrawled across cards or their fragile shells is another clue, Florida, their origin.

So that brings us back to the original question, where are our feathered friends coming from in recent times? Given the popularity of the Hialeah racetrack flock, it was a plausible explanation that flamingos came from there. But turns out, there's no evidence for flamingos flying away from their home, especially one that has a stable food source. And in 2015, a flock of 147 flamingos appeared in Palm Beach County. Such a large flock is unlikely to have escaped, all at once, from the smaller Hialeah population. Other captive populations do exist in Florida, but most birds there are tagged and wing-clipped to prevent escape. The researchers returned to

the idea of their Caribbean cousins. Here was more evidence, flamingos banded in the Yucatan peninsula have flown to Florida, as well as Louisiana, Cuba, Texas, and the Cayman Islands. Another species, the Greater Flamingo, tagged in beautiful countryside of southern France, have dispersed to Spain, Russia, and even Iran. So, the majority of evidence points to the fact that we have guests and let's hope they stay.

Mystery solved, but is that the end of story? Even though populations in the Caribbean are stable or increasing, flamingos still face threats ahead. One major one is habitat loss, of 30 to 40 nesting sites that dotted the Caribbean before 1900, only 5 to 6 remain. Hurricanes can also cause major damage to nesting colonies. For instance, Hurricane Irma killed thousands of flamingos in Cuba in 2017. The more intense tropical storms predicted under climate change may not be good news for flamingos. Other impacts from climate change, including sea level rise and pollution may pose an increasing threat to flamingos and their nesting grounds in the coming decades.