



# ROSEATE SPOONBILL

**CICONIIFORMES**  
**Family: Threskiornithidae**  
**Genus: *Platalea***  
**Species: *ajaja***



**Range:** South America mostly east of the Andes and coastal regions of the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and the Gulf Coast of the U.S.

**Habitat:** marshes, swamps, ponds, and rivers, feeding in both fresh and saltwater wetlands.

**Niche:** Aquatic/terrestrial, diurnal, omnivorous

**Wild diet:** small fish, amphibians, aquatic invertebrates, and some plant material.

**Zoo diet:** flamingo chow, small fish, insects

**Life Span:** (Wild) ~ 10 years (oldest known 16 years)  
(Captivity) up to 33 years

**Sexual dimorphism:** The male is slightly larger than the female and its bill is a little longer.

**Location in SF Zoo:** South American Tropical Rainforest and Aviary

---

## APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

---

Roseate Spoonbills are a large wading bird with long legs, a long neck, and a long, spatulate bill. They have a pink body and legs, and a white neck and breast with a bright red shoulder patch during breeding season. Their coloring can range from pale pink to bright magenta, depending on age and location. Their pink color is obtained from a carotenoid pigment in their crustacean diet. Adults have a pale green bald head ("golden buff" when breeding) with a grey bill. Immature birds have white, feathered heads, and the pink of the plumage is paler.

Roseate spoonbills hunt by touch instead of sight, an adaptation for a bird that feeds in muddy or vegetation-clogged waters. To feed, spoonbills wade through water no deeper than knee level, with their bill immersed, mandibles slightly open, sweeping their bill in rapid arcs from side to side to create swirling currents like mini-whirlpools that pull up small prey from the muddy bottom. Sensitive touch receptors along the bill's length detect vibrations and signal the bill to close quickly on the prey swept inside the spoon. Papillae then help move the food back to the throat. This unusual and specialized feeding style is known as "head-swinging." A spoonbill's nostrils are located at top of the bill, making it possible for the bird to breathe while the bill is under water.

**Weight:** ~ 3 lbs

**Height:** 31 in

**Wingspan:** 47 – 51 in

---

## STATUS & CONSERVATION

---

Not globally threatened. Roseate spoonbills were nearly hunted to extinction during the 1800s. Their striking pink feathers were popular on women's hats, and hunters from all over the United States competed for spoonbill plumes. In the early 1900s, roseate spoonbills began to re-colonize areas along the Gulf Coast and slowly increase in number. Today the species has recovered so well that it has no special conservation status but its threats come as a result of habitat loss.

---

## COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

---

Usually silent, the roseate spoonbill makes a low grunting sound when feeding. Spoonbills usually feed in groups, often near herons or other waders. Since spoonbills feed with their heads down, one of the spoonbills will often serve as sentry.

Roseate spoonbills are social birds, spending much of their time with other spoonbills and water birds, and nesting in colonies alongside ibises, storks, cormorants, herons, and egrets. They roost in the trees at night.

Roseate Spoonbills fly in flocks with other spoonbills, usually in long, strung-out diagonal lines. They fly with its head and neck outstretched. The wings beat slow and long.

---

## COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

---

The roseate spoonbill nests in colonies. Mature spoonbills usually arrive on the breeding grounds about a month before pairing. During breeding season, the male uses gifts of nesting material to attract the female. She then builds a large, deep nest in the lower branches of a tree close to water. Once mated, the pair remain monogamous during this breeding season. Both male and female take turns sitting on the eggs and feeding the young through regurgitation. The minimum breeding age is about 33 to 36 months. However, most don't mate until their fourth year.

Incubation:	22 - 24 days	Sexual Maturity:	3 years
# of eggs:	2 - 5 (usually 2 - 3)	Fledging:	6 weeks

---

## MISCELLANEOUS

---

A group of roseate spoonbills are collectively known as a "bowl" of spoonbills.

The Roseate Spoonbill, *Platalea ajaja* is of the ibis and spoonbill family, Threskiornithidae and is sometimes placed in its own genus *Ajaia*.

### Sources:

Handbook of Birds of the World, Vol 1 © 1992 Lynx Edicions, p 506.  
<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/birds/facts/factsheets/fact-rosespoonbill.cfm>  
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/species/spoonbill/>

created 10/2011