



# CHILEAN FLAMINGO

Phoenicopteriformes  
Family: Phoenicopteridae  
Genus: *Phoenicopterus*  
Species: *chilensis*



**Range:** Central Peru, south along the Andes to Tierra del Fuego

**Habitat:** Shallow brackish saltwater lakes and lagoons, usually in warmer climates

**Niche:** Diurnal, aquatic, omnivorous

**Wild diet:** Salt tolerant water plants, algae, crustaceans, brine shrimp, diatoms

**Zoo diet:** grains and chopped greens, "Flamingo Fare"

**Life Span:** (Wild) up to 40 years  
(Captivity) up to 50 years

**Sexual dimorphism:** none

**Location in SF Zoo:** Outside the Lemur Café

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## APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

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Flamingos are 4 to 5 feet tall and have an elongated, sinuous neck with short tails and a large wingspan. The plumage of the Chilean Flamingo is paler than other species. Colors vary within a range of white, pale pink, rose, salmon to black. The bill is black and adapted for filter feeding. The sharply downward bent bill is held upside down in the water and swept back and forth. The fleshy tongue pumps water through comb-like filtering structures lining the top half of their bill, filtering out the minute organisms. The toes are short and webbed, the legs are naked, with the heel and feet being pink. They have yellowish-gray legs with red joints and feet.

<b>Weight:</b>	5.5 – 7.5 lbs
<b>Length:</b>	44 – 55" inches
<b>Wingspan:</b>	4 -5 ft

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## STATUS & CONSERVATION

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Although they have an estimated population of no more than 200,000, Chilean flamingos are not an endangered species. Their uses to man are unfortunately the flamingo's greatest problem. In the past, their tongues were a rare, pickled delicacy and their plumage was sometimes sought for its vibrant color. They are vulnerable to habitat change and exploitation.

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## COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

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Flamingos are colonial birds and have loud rather goose-like voices, which are important in keeping the flock together when flying. They are highly gregarious when assembled in nesting areas and nests are usually built two nest-lengths apart.

Flamingos belong to one of the oldest bird groups still alive. They are able to swim as well as fly. They are migratory and fly in 'skeins' or 'V' formations. In flight the neck is extended forward and the legs are extended backward.

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## COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

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Both sexes participate in many ritualized displays such as 'head flagging' followed by 'wing saluting'. These displays are similar to preening and stretching movements that the birds adopt in everyday activities except they are more stiffly performed. These displays occur months before as well as after actual nesting. They appear to be monogamous birds. They breed in huge colonies, seldom smaller than 20 birds. Their nest sites are defended with various threat postures. Their nest is built in muddy areas by both parents, where the mud is scooped and piled into a mound about 15 inches in diameter and about 1.5 to 2 feet high. The eggs are torpedo shaped, preventing them from rolling out of the nest. The young are born with a gray down covering and a straight beak. They are fed by both parents "milk", a secretion from the crop. Initially they are protected under the parent's wing. The young are precocial and are fed until approximately three months of age. They are able to leave the nest to swim after several days but are not able to fly until about 11 weeks. The young do not lose their gray juvenile color until about two to three years of age.

Incubation:	28 - 32 days	Sexual Maturity:	3 - 5 years
# of Eggs:	1 - 2 chalky white eggs	Fledging:	11 weeks

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## MISCELLANEOUS

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To preserve their rosy color in captivity, they are fed a diet high in caratenoids.

"Flamingo" comes from the latin word for flame.

Their mostly alkaline diet does not fit the needs of other animals. Flamingos are scarce or absent in lakes with fish, but are found in large numbers in lakes where there are no fish to compete for food. By eating the smallest of organisms, they keep watering holes productive and also help circulate the waters by turning over the mud and silt on the bottoms of water bodies.

### Sources:

Living Birds of the World © 1958 Thomas Gillard, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Publishing  
Encyclopedia of Birds © 1985 Christopher, Perrins, New York: Facts on File  
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