

Pink Ring Safari ends in Lake Bogoria

Title

“Personally, I hope that no one ever will fully rationalise flamingos, and that they will remain the supremely beautiful, elusive, opportunistic, unpredictable beings I like to think they are”.

The above words contained in the late Leslie Brown’s book *‘Encounters with Nature’* continue to float as the presence or absence of Lesser and Greater Flamingos in the saline lakes of East Africa provokes admiration, debate or concern in public and conservation circles. Leslie served as an agricultural officer in the colonial Kenya but he is greatly remembered as an avian researcher who contributed much of what is known about raptors, pelicans and flamingos.

A Lesser Flamingo bearing a ring on its leg that was hatched in Lake Magadi in 1962 was recently recovered by a tourist - Nick Armour of England in Lake Bogoria on 13th February, 2013. The information retrieved from the ring confirms that the dead individual lived for 50 years and almost four months, making it the oldest known living wild flamingo. “This is an amazing discovery and now we know that some of them lived to be 50 years old”, said Fleur Ng’weno of Nature Kenya (BirdLife in Kenya).

Between 1961 and 1962 the soda mud flats of Natron were underwater making the site unsuitable neither for nest making nor raising young, thus the breeding episode of that year was temporarily shifted to Lake Magadi in Kajiado County, Kenya. Collin Jackson of the Ringing Scheme of East Africa said the recovered ring was one in a batch obtained from British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Of the 8,000 flamingos ringed, over ten recoveries have been made since 1962 notably one in West Africa which is 6,197km away from Lake Magadi.

The recovery of the “Jubilee Flamingo” emphasizes the connectedness of the soda lakes within the Great Rift Valley. The 1.5 – 2.5 million pink birds in Eastern Africa roam the soda lakes in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia in search of food. However the only regular breeding site for these birds is Lake Natron in Tanzania. The lake is largely covered by soda, raising the surface temperatures up to 60 degrees that keeps away mammalian predators from the nesting sites. However, there is abundant food and fresh water springs relied upon for drinking and washing off soda from the feathers of flamingos.

Image not found

School children and Joan (Alan's wife) removing soda anklets in 1962. Photo by Alan Root

Based on a detailed account by Leslie Brown and Alan Root in the *International Journal Science of Avian Science – IBIS*, at least 850,000 young were hatched in Magadi although a high rate of mortality was noted. Adult flamingos would fly to Lake Natron to obtain food usually coming back in the evening to feed the chicks. The chicks faced predators such as hyenas, vultures and jackals. Hindrance of movement and sometime death also resulted from salt-saturated water that formed anklets around their legs growing to the size of an apple. Twenty-seven thousand chicks had the anklets removed by a team of volunteers including the late Leslie Brown, Alan Root (a wildlife filmmaker), British Army, members of East Africa Natural History Society and even Evelyn Baring (Governor of Kenya, 1952-59). Children who were away from school owing to a teacher's go slow were also part of the team. Another 200,000 were saved from the super salty water by driving them into areas with fresher water pumped into the soda flats by Magadi Soda Company. Wellington boots donated by Bata Shoe Company protected the volunteer's feet from the biting soda as they rescued and ringed the birds.



The-Jubilee-flamingo-bearing-the-ring. Photo by Nick Armour

Bird ringing or banding involves capturing birds by use of a special net known as mist net, conducting and recording various measurements such as body weight, length of the beak, tarsus and wings as well as feather condition. Other specially modified traps are used for birds of prey and adult Flamingos. Just before the bird is released, a ring either plastic or metallic is attached to one of the legs. The ring contains a distinct number accompanied with the name of the specific ringing scheme. This is carried out by trained experts or volunteers but members of the public are encouraged to submit rings recovered to the nearest conservation agency. The information obtained provides more understanding about their movements and life history that is necessary to draw up appropriate conservation measures especially for threatened bird species.

In recent years, Lake Natron has been under intense threat coming from a proposal to construct a US\$450 million soda ash factory. Initially proposed by Tata Chemicals industries and now spearheaded by the Tanzania Government, the factory would cause major breeding disruption and put the entire East Africa Lesser Flamingo population at risk of extinction. A Cost Benefit Analysis study conducted indicated low economic returns of the soda mining project as compared to other activities such as tourism. Based on this, the Tanzania government should re-consider its intention to go ahead with the project. BirdLife, RSPB and Lake Natron Consultative Group have spearheaded the "Think Pink" campaign drawing attention to the negative impacts of the soda ash proposal to flamingos and economies of

East African countries.

Story by: Ken Mwathe, Caroline Njoki and Mercy Kariuki