

Title
Whilst Lesser Flamingo (*Phoeniconaias minor*) can attempt breeding every year, the scale and success of the breeding events can vary enormously. At Lake Natron, the success rate is mainly due to rainfall which can swamp the nest sites, many of which are only centimeters above the water level, but how the success can be measured is a challenge in itself due lack of data on population dynamics and a understanding of survival rates in the first year of a fledged bird.

Lake Natron in northern Tanzania is the most important breeding site for Lesser Flamingos. The majority of hatching and egg laying takes place during the months of September to April although there is peak in October to early December. This period is characterized by receding water levels and provides opportunities for the colonies to spread out and follow the cracks found in the soda ash where suitable mud can be accessed for nest construction.

Between September 2012 and January 2013 intense activity reminiscent of successful breeding has been reported. Marc Baker, an environmental management specialist says that hatching began in late September with two crèches (congregation of young birds) being counted, one of 150 chicks and another of 2,000 chicks in the southern lagoon and Pinyinyi delta respectively.

“In order to understand the location and scale of this years (end 2012, beginning 2013) breeding event, we conducted several aerial and ground counts over a 2 month period. Of particular interest was where on the surface of the lake major colony development takes place, how predictable those areas might be, and once hatched in which direction the young birds move and congregate. Preliminary results suggest 175,000 eggs counted on nest cones and 120,000 young hatched,” said Marc.

Lake Natron provides the ideal breeding conditions for Lesser Flamingos found in few other soda lakes in Africa and around the world. Nesting sites are isolated from predator and humans disturbance; perennial springs provide freshwater for chicks; food is abundant and suitable matter for nest construction is readily available.



A single crèche on the northern breeding colony at Lake Natron © Marc Baker

Leslie Brown who nearly died while trying to access the nesting places in 1970s described Lake Natron as “the foulest place on earth.”

Since 2006, the integrity of Lake Natron as a breeding site for the pink birds has been threatened by a proposal to construct a \$450 million soda ash processing plant. It was initially proposed by Tata Chemicals Industries with the Government of Tanzania but the former withdrew following intense local and international pressure.

The Government, through the National Development, maintains a keen interest in developing soda ash mining infrastructure at the lake. However, a recent economic study commissioned by the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST) shows that soda ash mining is not economically viable while, tourism and livelihoods development, are better options ([Read more](#)).

WCST has also been working with local communities at Lake Natron to improve and expand livelihood options.

“This breeding activity is further evidence of the importance of Lake Natron for the survival of Lesser Flamingo as a species” said Kariuki Ngang’ang’a, the Species Programme Manager at the BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat. “Flamingos face many challenges and every effort should go towards protecting the integrity of this globally significant site.”