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ETOSHA FLAMINGOES AND THE RESCUE OPERATION IN 1989

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Greater and Lesser Flamingoes are breeding visitors to Etosha Pan during the wet season (Berry 1972), and their arrival in Etosha coincides with the rapid decrease in numbers along the Namibian west coast (Tony Williams, personal communication).

Every year after the first heavy rains have fallen, we receive reports of migrating flamingoes from south of Etosha. These reports are not different to observations made in Okaukuejo; flock after flock of banking flamingoes can be heard at night flying from the west in the direction of Etosha Pan. Flock-sizes have not been determined because of the lack of visibility, but the available information suggests that large numbers are involved in such migrations. Single adult Greater Flamingoes have been observed almost annually along the main Okaukuejo/Outjo road south of Etosha, and are presumed to be grounded due to exhaustion from the long migration from the coast. Occasionally, exhausted or injured flamingoes have been captured by well-meaning people and brought to Okaukuejo for treatment. In most instances the stress of being caught and handled in addition to the original ailment has probably been too severe, and many rehabilitation attempts have been unsuccessful.

The eastern region of Etosha National Park is usually the first to receive substantial rainfall. Fisher's Pan north of Namutoni, with its large catchment area, is usually the first reservoir to fill with floodwater and as a result it attracts the initial flamingo influx. Fisher's Pan can therefore be used to gauge the extent of flamingo migration until other suitable feeding areas become flooded, causing the flamingoes to disperse.

Flamingoes may attempt to breed in Etosha in every year that receives an high average rainfall (Archibald & Nott 1987). Flamingoes are known to have bred from 1984 to 1986 as well as in 1989 and 1990, but have failed each time because the water evaporated before the chicks fledged.

Greater Flamingoes are documented as irregular breeders in southern Africa (Maclean 1985) while Lesser Flamingoes are documented as attempting to breed most years in Etosha Pan (Maclean 1985). Observations in Etosha since 1985 have shown that

all breeding attempts were made by Greater Flamingoes, with none by Lesser Flamingoes. However, Lesser Flamingoes have substantially outnumbered Greater Flamingoes at Etosha, and this may be the reason for breeding attempts being attributed to the former. Juvenile Lesser Flamingoes observed along the Namibian west coast each year have been attributed to breeding in Etosha, but this has definitely not been the case since 1985 when annual monitoring of flamingo breeding began.

At the end of February 1989 two dense concentrations of flamingoes were observed in the Okerfontein area of traditional nesting sites on Etosha Pan. This observation was made from the mainland south of the sites and the aggregations were clearly visible despite the "mirage" over the pan. It was assumed that breeding had commenced, since flamingo aggregations in these areas in previous years had subsequently proved to be nesting birds. No aerial survey was made of these sites until 6 May 1989, when on the now dry pan, a nursery of approximately 700 chicks was found. They were located next to a colony of approximately 3000 empty nests and were surrounded by Lappetfaced Vultures and Tawny Eagles, in an incident similar to that recorded in the 1986 breeding attempt (Archibald & Nott 1987). The chicks were estimated to be 4 - 6 weeks old and were attended by three adult Greater Flamingoes. Within a one kilometre radius of this site thousands of other apparently unused nests could be seen in what would appear to have been the beginning of new colonies. From the aircraft's elevation it could be seen that these nests were constructed on the eastern, and delta-like end of the Prehistoric waterway, a sump likely to hold water for the longest period on the pan.

On the same day an aerial survey of the Kilometre River was undertaken where an estimated 15 000 flamingoes were reported feeding. This river and Fisher's Pan were the only two remaining feeding grounds in Etosha.

Enquiries were immediately made at various Zoological Gardens and Bird Parks as to the demand for six-week old flamingo chicks. The response was overwhelming and it was decided to plan an operation in order to supply the Zoological Gardens and other Institutions with these birds, which would otherwise have perished.

After establishing that the flamingo chicks had not migrated away from the nesting area as they were known to do (Berry 1972, Archibald & Nott 1987), and that the pan surface was hard enough to carry the weight of a 4 x 4 vehicle, the rescue team made camp about 1 kilometre from the colony (7 km from the mainland) on the evening of 11 May.

During the night the honking call of adult Greater Flamingoes could be heard as flocks approached the colony from their feeding grounds. It was established that they were feeding at both the Ekuma River and Fisher's Pan (70 and 40 km distances respectively).

As the adults approached the colony, the chicks became very vocal and it was awesome to think that even in the darkness of night each chick in the nursery would be located and fed only by its biological parents. The activity at the colony gradually slowed down during the night and at 04h30 the last group of adults could be heard flying off in the direction of the Ekuma River.

Before dawn of the next morning, the rescue team had erected 300 metres of net in a funnel formation on two sides of the nests and chicks. At first light the open end of the funnel was closed and the chicks were herded into ever-narrowing sections. Panicking groups of chicks rushed at the nets in an attempt to escape. The force of the charges caused sections of the net to collapse and approximately 50 chicks managed to escape. Tawny Eagles were seen to attack and kill some of the escaped stragglers, and were on two occasions robbed of their prey by Lappetfaced Vultures.

The captured chicks were finally contained in a small enclosure and the process of ferrying them by four-wheel-drive vehicles to the mainland 8 km away was started. A total of 765 chicks, all Greater Flamingoes, were rescued in this way.

Once on the mainland, the chicks were transferred into an enclosed truck for the long 140 km trip to Okaukuejo. During transport weak and emaciated chicks collapsed and died. It was probable that these had already been deserted by their parents prior to the rescue.

The staff tennis court in Okaukuejo was specially prepared for the flamingoes and became their new home until collected by the recipient organisations. A mortality rate of 7% was experienced from the total number of chicks captured and was attributed mainly to the weak condition of the birds when captured and thereafter due to respiratory disorders and extremely cold temperatures at night.

Zoological Gardens and Bird Parks throughout the Republic of South Africa and Namibia benefitted from the donation of these flamingo chicks which were carrying a market value of over R1 000 each. It was interesting to note that even the youngest of the captured flamingo chicks were immediately able to feed independently at the estimated age of 5 weeks (35 days). Natural feeding by Greater Flamingo chicks hand-reared by Berry (1974) occurred at 7 weeks (49 days), and these chicks only became independent of syringe-feeding at 14 weeks (98 days). Maclean (1985) states that Greater Flamingoes may feed independently at 70 - 75 days of age.

The rescued chicks were fed on a high protein diet of Pro-nutro and turkey mash mixed into a soup to which was added a calcium supplement. The chicks kept the food particles in suspension in the shallow feeding trays by their characteristic trampling.

In an attempt to follow migration patterns, forty chicks were kept and reared in Etosha, colour-ringed and released at the Ekuma River and Fisher's Pan once fledged. The re-introduction was

successful and twelve colour-ringed juveniles were seen in the company of adult Greater Flamingoes on the Ekuma River four weeks after release.

Two weeks after the rescue of the Greater Flamingoes had taken place, a single juvenile Lesser Flamingo was observed at a waterhole on the western edge of the Etosha Pan, and a further 250 Lesser Flamingo juveniles were observed on the Ekuma River. This triggered a systematic aerial search of the previously uncovered areas of the pan to establish whether they bred there. No evidence could be found and it was later established that flamingoes had bred extensively on the Makgadikgadi Pans in Botswana. It is probable that these juveniles had moved into Etosha from Botswana on their way to the Namib coast.

It is worth noting that two weeks after the chicks were rescued, the adult flamingo numbers on the Ekuma River had declined from 15 000 to approximately 4 000.

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