

# Bird of the Year 2010 LESSER FLAMINGO

## distribution & movements

The Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopus minor* is fairly widely distributed across Africa, especially in southern and East Africa, and it also occurs in India and Pakistan. Across this range, it is associated with open, nutrient-rich shallow wetlands. It occurs in large flocks, which can contain tens of thousands of birds.

Lesser Flamingos usually travel at night, at an average speed of about 60 kilometres per hour. Recent research using satellite-tracking devices has shown extensive local movements, such as between the lakes in the Great Rift Valley in East Africa, but there is still no evidence for the movement of birds between East and southern Africa. There is, however, a recent record of a Lesser Flamingo that was ringed at Lake Magadi in Kenya in 1962 and recovered 40 years later at an ephemeral lake in the Western Sahara. This was the first evidence of interchange between the East and West African populations.



Nest turrets  
MARK D. ANDERSON (5)



Lesser Flamingo chick

## breeding

For a species with a population that numbers 1.5–2.5 million individuals, it is remarkable that only six global breeding sites are known for Lesser Flamingos: four in Africa and two in India. In Africa it breeds at Etosha Pan (Namibia), Sua Pan (Botswana), Lake Natron (Tanzania) and, since 2007, Kamfers Dam near Kimberley in South Africa. At least 12 breeding attempts at other sites in South Africa have been unsuccessful.

Breeding takes place during the summer months, but only when the ephemeral wetlands are flooded. The breeding areas, which consist of aggregations of mud nest turrets, are usually some distance from the mainland and thus isolated and protected from terrestrial predators. Marabou Storks, Lappet-faced Vultures and eagles catch chicks and adults at the breeding areas, and constant harassment can lead to the colony being abandoned.

A single egg (rarely two) is laid on the nest turret, and then incubated for about 28 days by both parents. The chicks eat their own egg shells shortly after hatching and leave the nest about six days later to join a crèche of similarly aged chicks. The adults feed the chicks a secretion (crop milk), which is produced in the upper parts of the digestive tract.

The chicks develop their first feathers within the first month, are fully feathered by two months, and undertake their first flight between 70 and 90 days. At Sua Pan they have been observed walking as far as 80 kilometres as they follow the receding water, with many birds succumbing along the way.

## feeding

The Lesser Flamingo feeds both during the day and night. It wades through the shallow water, sometimes swimming in deeper water, with its bill upside down, filtering blue-green algae from the surface and diatoms from the bottom layer. Its large tongue pumps water into and out of the mouth, using the lamellae (bony plates with gills) in the bill to filter out the food.



Filter feeding



ALBERT FROENEMAN

## threats & challenges



Juvenile Lesser Flamingos

The Lesser Flamingo is categorised as Near Threatened globally and in South Africa. The population decline in southern Africa has been attributed to poor recruitment because of infrequent breeding at Etosha Pan and Sua Pan, and anthropogenic threats at the breeding sites. Such human-induced threats include soda-ash and salt mining, damming of rivers in catchment areas, collision with fences and telephone and electricity lines, disturbance by low-flying aircraft, pollution of wetlands, and inappropriate developments adjacent to breeding areas.



The man-made island at Kamfers Dam, Kimberley

Mass die-offs of Lesser Flamingos occasionally occur on the shallow saline lakes in Kenya and Tanzania, during which tens of thousands die. The reasons for these mortality events are not known, but suggestions include poisoning by heavy metals or by the toxins produced by cyanobacteria, and tuberculosis or other diseases.

Kamfers Dam is the species' newest breeding site, with 9 000, 13 000 and a few hundred chicks being produced in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively, on a large, purpose-built island. This now internationally important site has been in the public eye, not only for the significance of its breeding events, but for the controversies surrounding the probable negative effects on the breeding flamingos of deteriorating water quality and a proposed massive housing development on the shore of the dam.

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For more information on Lesser Flamingos, visit the IUCN SSG Flamingo Specialist Group Flamingo Resources website ([www.flamingoresources.org](http://www.flamingoresources.org)) and the Save the Flamingo Association website ([www.savetheflamingo.co.za](http://www.savetheflamingo.co.za)).

The 'CMS-AEWA International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Lesser Flamingo' can be downloaded from [http://www.unep-aewa.org/publications/technical\\_series.htm](http://www.unep-aewa.org/publications/technical_series.htm). A webcam on the Lesser Flamingo breeding island at Kamfers Dam provides round-the-clock viewing of the thousands of breeding flamingos ([www.africam.com](http://www.africam.com)).



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