

Pink birds and baseball stars... renovations of the flamingo enclosure at the Birmingham Zoo, Alabama, USA

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Abstract

Flamingos at the Birmingham Zoo, Alabama were provided with changes to their habitat to encourage nesting and breeding activity within the flock. A fundraising effort provided the money for improvements to the birds' pool and surrounding land areas, including removing unwanted vegetation and re-designing the edges around the pool to improve access for the birds. A donation of infield clay by a local baseball team was instrumental in enabling the bird team at the Zoo to make important alterations to the flamingos' nesting island. This article discusses the changes made to the flamingo habitat and the timescale for the development and reintroduction of the birds, as well as the importance of relationships with organisations external to the Zoo, which are so helpful to the completion of projects of this nature.

Resumen

Los flamencos del Zoológico de Birmingham, Alabama, EE.UU. recibieron cambios en su hábitat para fomentar la actividad de anidación y reproducción en la bandada. Un esfuerzo de recaudación de fondos proporcionó el dinero para mejorar la piscina de las aves y las áreas circundantes, incluyendo la eliminación de vegetación no deseada y el rediseño de los bordes alrededor de la piscina para mejorar el acceso de las aves. Una donación de arcilla de cancha por parte de un equipo de béisbol local fue fundamental para permitir que el equipo de aves del zoológico hiciera modificaciones importantes en la isla de anidación de los flamencos. En este artículo se analizan los cambios realizados en el hábitat de los flamencos y el cronograma para el desarrollo y reintroducción de las aves, así como la importancia de las relaciones con organizaciones externas al Zoológico, tan útiles para la realización de proyectos de esta naturaleza.

Résumé

Au zoo de Birmingham, Alabama, des flamants, ont bénéficié de modifications de leur habitat pour encourager les activités de nidification et de reproduction. Un effort de collecte de fonds a permis d'améliorer le bassin d'oiseaux et ses pourtours, notamment en supprimant la végétation indésirable et en remodelant les bords du bassin pour améliorer l'accès des oiseaux. Un don d'argile fait par une équipe de baseball locale a permis à l'équipe de soigneurs des oiseaux du zoo d'apporter des modifications importantes à l'îlot de nidification des flamants. Cet article traite des changements apportés à l'habitat des flamants et du calendrier du développement et de la réintroduction des oiseaux, ainsi que de l'importance des relations avec les organisations extérieures au zoo, qui sont si utiles à la réalisation de projets de cette nature.

The Birmingham Zoo in Alabama houses a flock of 21 American / Caribbean flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), 12 males and nine

females, with a median age of 18 years of age. The flamingos were originally brought in as eggs in June 2002 and hand reared by Zoo

staff. These birds live in the “Flamingo Lagoon” exhibit. The pool, yard and holding building were originally opened in 1955, and were originally constructed for capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) and waterfowl before being updated in subsequent years for flamingos. Pre-renovation (Figure 1), the exhibit had a large lagoon (with a depth ranging between 1.2m at its deepest to 5cm at

its shallowest) with steeply inclined walls, an island covered in pampas grass as a visual barrier, a small usable land space (the majority of the land being covered in decorative ivy) and a concrete cinderblock building with a single large-holding stall with a sloping floor that could be partially flooded to create a pool for the birds and a small keeper space for cleaning and supply storage.



Figure 1: The original flamingo exhibit at the Birmingham Zoo, prior to the refurbishment (photo credit: K. Pitchford).

After many decades of planning and consultation and a robust fundraising effort, the Zoo raised \$120,000 for the complete make-over of the flamingos’ home. It took a total of three months from the time the birds were corralled off exhibit and relocated to the

Zoo’s health centre (Figure 2) in September 2019 to the completion of the project in December 2019, when the birds were reintroduced to the renovated and enhanced exhibit.



Figure 2: Flamingos are moved to the health centre at the Birmingham Zoo before renovation and landscaping works commence in and around their exhibit. Soft turf is provided as the substrate in the temporary housing to protect the bird’s feet (photo credit: K. Pitchford).

Renovations included clearing out much of the vegetation and many of the old-growth trees, which presented potential falling hazards to the birds and to zoo guests, installing new metal fencing to replace an old wooden fence, increasing the overall footprint of the habitat, removing an old wooden boardwalk (used by guests) that contoured the shallower end of the pool, installing a breeding area with sand and clay on the island portion of the habitat, and resurfacing the sides of the pool to allow easier access for the flamingos to and from the pool. The flamingos were reintroduced in December (Figure 3) and they have been monitored by animal care staff, who have seen that the birds have been doing well since

their move into their renewed home. Although the flamingos regularly built nest mounds in the original exhibit, eggs have only been produced once (in 2017) and were infertile. The parents did not tend to the nest and trail cameras placed overnight revealed that the entire flock would move from their nesting area to the pool for most of the night. These exhibit renovations will allow for better husbandry and management regimes to be provided for the flamingos, as well as enhanced opportunities for the birds to successful nest within the exhibit.



Figure 3: Flamingos are let out into their enhanced and renewed exhibit, being closely monitored by animal care staff to ensure they settle back in safe and well (photo credit: K. Pitchford).

A local baseball team, the Birmingham Barons, donated a load of infield clay to the new exhibit, in the hope of encouraging successful breeding. Clay was needed for the nesting area and makes an excellent substrate for

flamingo nest building. In May 2020, members of the baseball team assisted Zoo staff in moving this clay into the exhibit, as well as incorporating it into the habitat overall and the bird's nesting area (Figure 4).

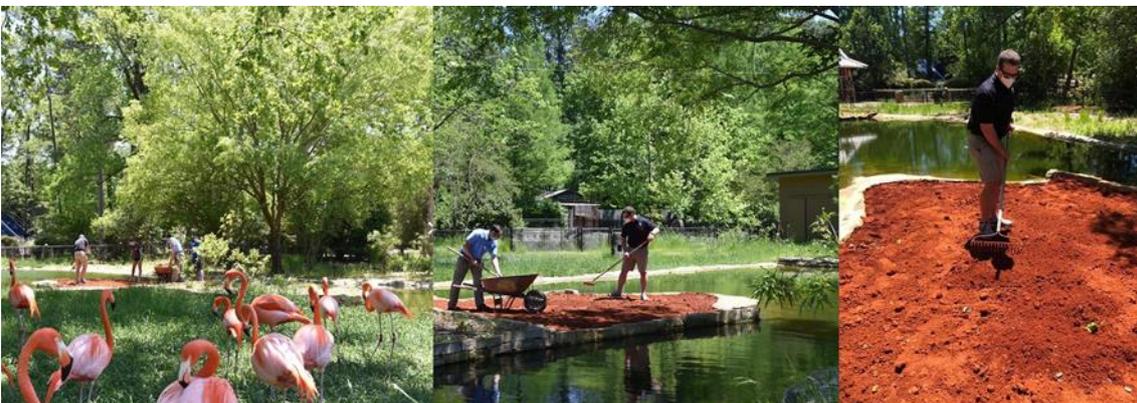


Figure 4: New clay for the flamingo nesting island is moved into position by the Birmingham Barons and Zoo staff (Photo credit: K. Pitchford).

The donation of clay by the baseball team provided an excellent media opportunity to show the links that can be forged between zoos and the wider community within which they operate (Figure 5); telling an excellent

story of public and corporate engagement that benefits animal welfare and promotes the conservation outcomes of the Zoo and its animals.

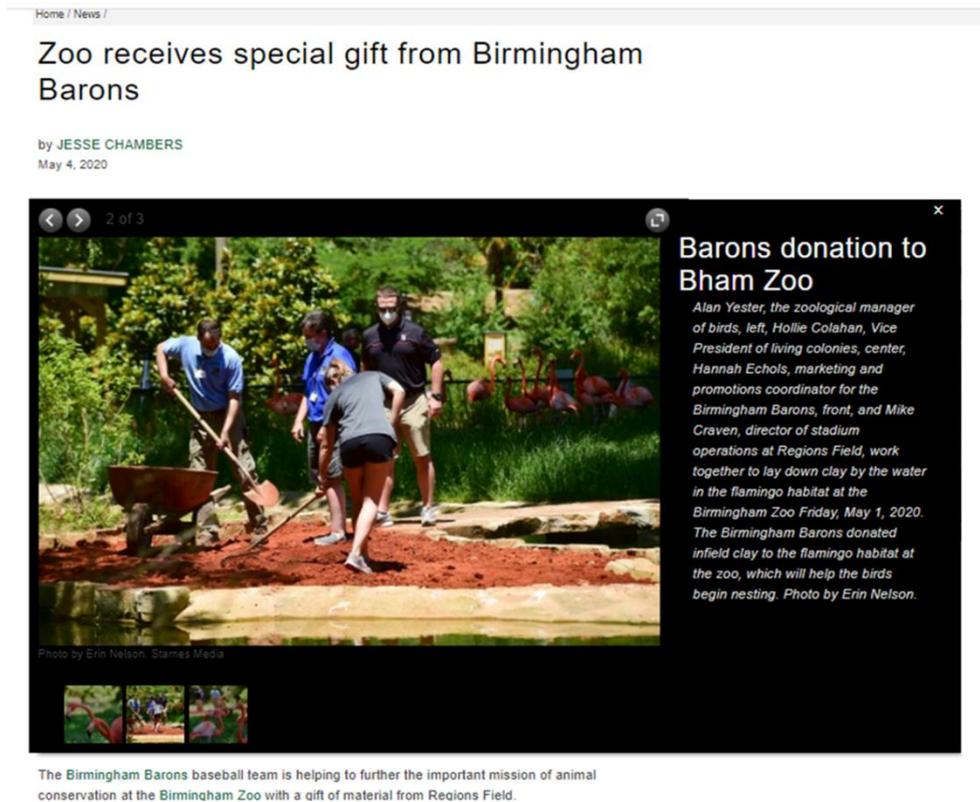


Figure 5: Media coverage of the Birmingham Baron's donation of infield clay to enhance the American flamingo exhibit (and chances of nesting) at the Birmingham Zoo, showing the links between the animal collection, conservation outcomes and local patronage. Article from: <https://www.villagelivingonline.com/news/zoo-receives-special-gift-from-birmingham-barons/>

The author of this article was not an employee of the Birmingham Zoo at the time of the renovations. Further information on the Caribbean flamingos at the Birmingham Zoo should be addressed to the contact information on the Zoo's website www.birminghamzoo.com/about-us/contact-us