

Celebrating 60 years of flamingo care and a 75th anniversary for WWT in 2021

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Abstract

The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) was founded as the Severn Wildfowl Trust in November 1946 on the bank of the River Severn in Gloucestershire by pioneering ornithologist and conservationist Sir Peter Scott. In 2021, WWT celebrated both its 75th anniversary and the keeping of flamingos into its living collections for 60 years. This article gives a brief overview of WWT's history and achievements in aviculture and conservation to date, and reviews how its flamingo flocks have developed and been managed over the past six decades.

Resumen

El Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) fue fundado como el Severn Wildfowl Trust en noviembre de 1946 a orillas del Río Severn en Gloucestershire por el ornitólogo y conservacionista pionero Sir Peter Scott. En 2021, WWT celebró tanto su 75^o aniversario como el mantenimiento de los flamencos en sus colecciones vivientes durante 60 años. Este artículo describe brevemente la historia y los logros de WWT en avicultura y conservación hasta la fecha, y revisa cómo se han desarrollado y manejado sus bandadas de flamencos durante las últimas seis décadas.

Résumé

Le Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) a été fondé sous le nom de Severn Wildfowl Trust en novembre 1946 sur la rive de la rivière Severn dans le Gloucestershire par l'ornithologue et écologiste pionnier Sir Peter Scott. En 2021, le WWT a fêté à la fois son 75^e anniversaire et le maintien de flamants roses dans ses collections vivantes pendant 60 ans. Cet article donne un bref aperçu de l'histoire et des réalisations de WWT en matière d'aviculture et de conservation à ce jour, et passe en revue la façon dont ses populations de flamants roses se sont développées et ont été gérées au cours des six dernières décennies.

Introduction

Twenty Twenty-One is a special year for the current home for the Flamingo Specialist Group, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) headquarters at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire, UK as WWT is marking both its 75th birthday and 60 years of keeping flamingos in its living collections. WWT Slimbridge, as the Severn Wildfowl Trust, first opened its doors to visitors on 10th November 1946 (WWT, 2021). And in 1961, three pioneer groups of three flamingo species arrived at WWT Slimbridge (The

Wildfowl Trust, 1962), and now WWT has the most complete collection of this type of bird to be seen anywhere in the world.

The Severn Wildfowl Trust was founded by the late Sir Peter Scott (1909-1989) and gradually evolved into the Wildfowl Trust and then the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust. WWT now manages ten wetland sites across the United Kingdom. Seven of these centres contain a visitor centre with a living collection of wetland wildlife and a nature reserve, these are Slimbridge, Martin Mere in Lancashire (opened in 1974), Washington

in Tyne & Wear (opened in 1975), Castle Espie in Northern Ireland (managed by WWT since 1989), Llanelli in Wales (opened in 1991), London (opened in 2000). Two centres with a visitor centre plus nature reserve; Caerlaverock in Scotland (opened in 1971) and Welney in Norfolk (opened in 1970). And one nature reserve with no visitor centre, Steart (created in 2014). WWT's nature reserves, living collections and visitor centres engage many thousands of visitors each year with the stories of wetland wildlife and why wetlands are vitally important to biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services and human health and wellbeing.

As WWT enters its 76th year, it is more poignant than ever that WWT thinks about where it has come from. As an organisation based on true admiration for its founder, those working for WWT often find themselves thinking "what would Scott do?" Whilst that question can only go unanswered, you cannot help but observe that Sir Peter Scott was a pioneer of change. Throughout his early life and career, Peter Scott never shied away from change whether it be his vocation, hobby, or opinion. He transitioned from a hunter, to a rehabilitator, to a collector, to a conservationist, and finally, into an introducer. He went "full circle" in his approach to the natural world and wildfowl in particular. He recognised that humanity cannot protect what we cannot understand, and so opened his doors to promote conservation education. He threw himself into his ideas by innovating, creating, expanding, and protecting, and ultimately creating a network of 10 wetland centres that represent his priorities. WWT is ultimately a family- a family of individuals that love Sir Peter Scott, and who come together to support the charity's conservation aims. Today, we endeavour to

change with the times, and remain dedicated to wetlands and all those who depend upon them.

WWT achievements

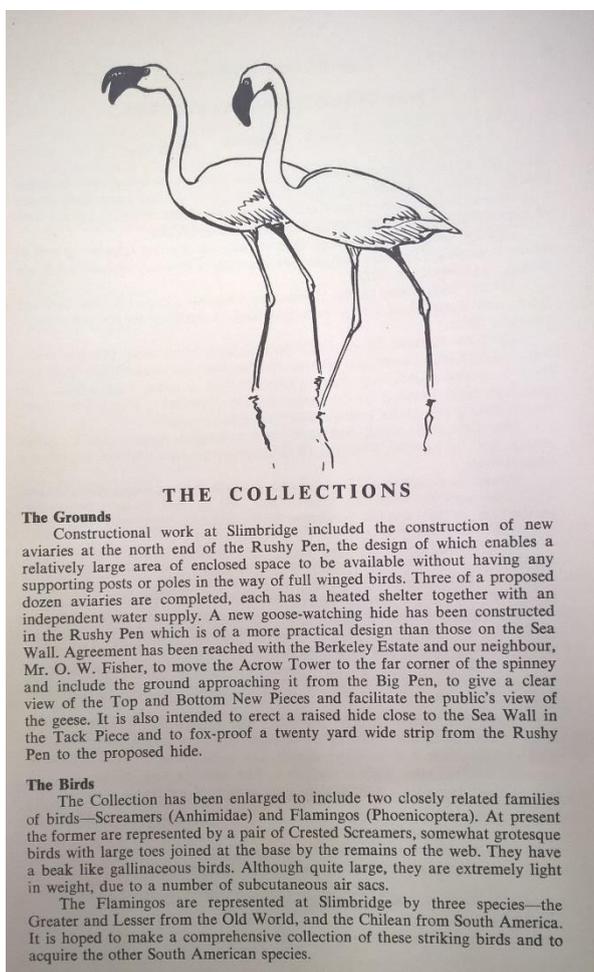
Across the course of these 75 years, WWT has been involved in numerous successful conservation projects, including the famous rescue of the Hawaiian goose (nene), *Branta sandvicensis* from extinction thanks to captive breeding and eventual reintroduction. More recently, WWT has been a key partner in the conservation of the Madagascar pochard, *Aythya innotata* ("the world's rarest duck"), Baer's pochard (*A. baeri*), common crane (*Grus grus*), spoon-billed sandpiper (*Calidris pygmaea*) and black-tailed godwit (*Limosa limosa*). Long-running monitoring work of Bewick's swan (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) has provided vital information on population declines, and how to reduce anthropogenic risks to the swans, across their migration route. Peter Scott managed and maintained a large collection of wildfowl to explain such conservation stories and to educate visitors on the diversity of life in wetlands, and why it was worthy of protection. Many wetland species show a diverse array of interesting behaviours, are brightly coloured and easy to use for engagement and education. The flamingos are an excellent example of such enigmatic wetland species.

Fabulous flamingo facts

The first flamingo species to arrive at WWT Slimbridge was imported in 1961 at the request of WWT's founder, Sir Peter Scott, and these were 12 Chileans flamingos. These birds were followed shortly after by 13 greater and nine lesser flamingos in that same year. Today, flamingos of all six species can be seen across four WWT centres. Flocks of flamingos were first established at WWT Martin Mere in 1976, at

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WWT Washington in 1986 and at WWT Llanelli at its opening in 1991. Caribbean flamingos arrived at the Severn Wildfowl Trust in 1962 (The Wildfowl Trust, 1964) and in 1965 the first individuals of the rare and relatively unknown Andean and James's (puna) flamingos were brought into the collection (The Wildfowl Trust, 1967). By 1965, Slimbridge housed well over 100 flamingos, including a huge flock (for the time) of 58 Chilean flamingos. This is thought to have been the most flamingos ever kept in one place in the UK at that time.



An extract from the 13th Annual Report of The Wildfowl Trust, highlighting the arrival of flamingos into the collection at Slimbridge in 1961 (The Wildfowl Trust, 1962).

Sir Peter Scott was interested in the evolutionary relationships of the different species of birds that he wished to exhibit in his wildfowl collections. He researched the

classification of and taxonomic links between flamingos (Phoenicopteriformes) and the wildfowl (Anseriformes), and he concluded that the flamingos (based on their webbed feet, behaviour patterns and affinity to water, feather parasites, composition of their egg yolk, and their vocalisations) were very similar to the ducks, geese, and swans. He wished to exhibit flamingos at Slimbridge to give the fullest picture to his visitors of how wildfowl had evolved and to which species they are most closely related. As modern-day taxonomy has developed, we now understand that the flamingos are not closely related to the Anseriformes but are likely aligned with the pigeons (Columbiformes), grebes (Podicipediformes) and shorebirds (Charadriiformes) (Jarvis et al., 2014; Jetz et al., 2012; Kuhl et al., 2021).

Over these past 60 years of flamingo care, WWT has seen numerous “firsts” in flamingo keeping and breeding. Including, the first UK breeding of Caribbean flamingos in 1968 (The Wildfowl Trust, 1969) - and potentially of the very first flamingo chicks ever to be reared in the UK although there is record (DOC/1/29 in the ZSL Archives) of a greater flamingo hatching at London Zoo in 1857 but little evidence of what happened to it (Edwards, 2012)- followed by the first UK breeding of Chilean flamingos in 1969 and, in that same year, the first time that Andean flamingo had successfully nested in a zoological collection anywhere in the world (The Wildfowl Trust, 1970).

Flamingos are long-lived birds (Rose et al., 2014) and because of the excellent standards of care they have received, some of the original, pioneer flamingos that arrived in 1961 are still alive at WWT Slimbridge. Many of the lesser flamingos and Chilean flamingos are these original birds, and a small group of 19 greater

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flamingos, that were collected in 1956 (pre-dating their arrival at Slimbridge by five years!) are still going strong.

Developing flamingo conservation

Sir Peter Scott was passionate about flamingo conservation (Scott, 1975). He recognised the unique features of these birds, such as how they collect their food and the importance of their beautiful courtship displays, and why that made them susceptible to environmental changes and human disturbances. In this regard Peter Scott was way ahead of his time in recognising the vulnerability of wetlands, and the specialised species that depend on them, to adverse human activities. He understood that living collections and zoological organisations had a strong role to play in conserving flamingos- by building sustainable flocks in safe places that people could observe and engage with, and that researchers could study to help better understand the needs of the flamingo in the wild (e.g. what should be protected and why?).

As a result of this conservation focus, Peter Scott organised the first international flamingo symposium, held at WWT Slimbridge, in 1973 (Kear & Duplaix, 1975). The output from this symposium was published in a book "Flamingos" in 1975 that is still considered an authority text on these birds to this day. More output from this symposium was increased collaboration in the zoological community to build bigger flocks to hope that breeding of all species would become more common (Kear & Palmes, 1980). For example, London and Copenhagen Zoos swapped their handful of James's and Andean flamingos into the Slimbridge flock, and in exchange Slimbridge provided London Zoo with Chilean flamingos to increase the size of the group in Regent's Park. Cooperation for conservation clearly

at the heart of WWT's mission, and this is still true today.

Conclusions

Seven-five years later, the conservation focus detailed above has also allowed WWT to build flocks of birds at its different centres without needing to take flamingos from the wild. Greater flamingos were first sent from Slimbridge to start a new flock at WWT Martin Mere in the 1980s. All of these were WWT- hatched birds. More recently, when WWT Llanelli opened at the start of the 1990s, the Caribbean flamingo flock created for this new wetland centre was formed completely from Slimbridge-hatched birds (Hewston, 1991).

Back to 2021 and flamingos are still at the heart of what WWT is all about. Flamingos are one of the most popular of animals to see at the wetland centres that house them (Rose, 2018) and by being home to the IUCN SSC Flamingo Specialist Group, WWT can assist with coordination and promotion of flamingo conservation and management activities. With three species (Chilean, puna and lesser) listed as Near Threatened and the Andean flamingo listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of threatened species, this flamingo focus is as important today as it was 60 years ago.

WWT's aviculturists and members of the living collections teams continue to care for Sir Peter Scott's legacy. At WWT Slimbridge, staff continue to care for many of the very same birds that Scott himself welcomed over 70 years ago. These ancient flamingos, pieces of living history, provide incredible perspective. Where shorter lived species have passed through dozens of generations in the last 75 years, where the "pink birds" are concerned WWT is, on occasion, still on its very first. This responsibility is awe inspiring.

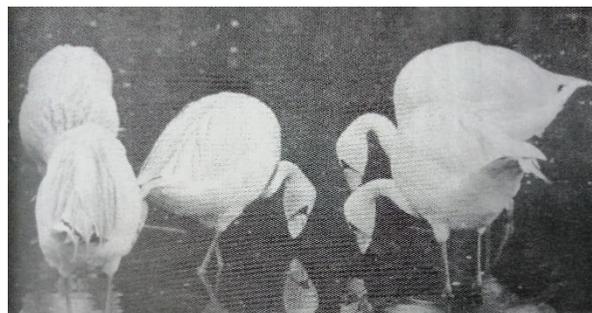
Many happy returns to WWT!



WWT's first flamingos that arrived at Slimbridge in 1961. Left: greater flamingos. Top: Chilean flamingos. Bottom: lesser flamingos. Photo credit: WWT.



The next arrivals in the form of Caribbean flamingos (top left) and the rare and unusual Andean (top right and bottom left) and James's (puna) flamingos (bottom right). Photo credit: WWT.



Documentation of head flagging in the James's (puna) flamingos at WWT Slimbridge in 1972. Managing these species in captivity allowed for observation and recording of behaviours hard to describe out in the wild. Photo taken from Kear and Duplaix (1975).

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