

CONSERVATION FACT SHEET



Florida Flamingo Program

The American Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) is one of the most beautiful and enigmatic birds of south Florida. Early explorers documented hundreds and even thousands of flamingos in Everglades including John James Audubon. Other early reports also mention impressive numbers, such as Wurdemann's report of the August 1857 capture of nearly 100 birds near Indian Key and the observation of 1,000 flamingos in February 1890 eighteen miles east of Cape Sable.

Following these early sightings when flamingos seemed abundant, reports in the early twentieth century dropped to mostly single individuals and small groups. It seems likely that flamingos present in Florida Bay during this period were subjected to the same pressures that led to population collapses of other birds. Beginning in the late 1800's the wading birds of Florida Bay were devastated by the millinery trade. Hunters destroyed entire bird colonies to supply feathers for fashionable hats. Even when the Lacey Act of 1900 and Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918 reduced hunting pressure, new threats emerged as drainage efforts in South Florida altered the hydrology of the Everglades.

Recently, the American Flamingo has been present within Everglades National Park in small numbers most winters, and sometimes throughout the summer. Reports include individuals scattered across large bays such as Snake Bight, groups seen in the coastal mud lakes during aerial surveys for exotic plants, and even the occasional large flock such as the 19 flamingos that made Lake Ingraham their home from January through March 2012. Other large group sightings include 30 that wintered in 1999, 57 by Pete Frezza, and 70+ by Juan Valadez during a North American Migration Count.

The origin of the flamingos that visit Florida Bay has long been a point of speculation. American Flamingos nest across the Caribbean, with sizable breeding colonies in the Bahamas, Cuba, Turks and Caicos, and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. In addition, there is a captive, breeding population of American Flamingos that has lived at the Hialeah Racetrack in northern Miami-Dade County for at least 73 years.

A little light was shed on the mystery origin of Florida's flamingos in 2002 when a park ranger recorded the leg band on a flamingo in Everglades National park. It was later discovered that the bird had been banded as a fledgling at the Ria Lagartos Biosphere Reserve on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. This bird was subsequently found back in the Yucatan the following year. In 2012, a second bird was also traced to the Yucatan peninsula. These sightings confirm that flamingos are capable of long-distance flight and that birds from several nearby breeding islands are capable of making their way to Florida.

By placing satellite transmitters on flamingos wintering in Everglades National Park we can shed light on many long-standing questions about Florida's flamingos - Everglades forgotten wading bird. With this information, we can hopefully work with partners in their countries of origin to protect their feeding and nesting habitat to increase the migratory Florida population back up to historic levels.