

# Caribbean Flamingo

(*Phoenicopterus ruber*)

**Kingdom:** *Animalia*

**Phylum:** *Chordata*

**Class:** *Aves*

**Order:** *Phoenicopteriformes*

**Family:** *Phoenicopteridae*



## HABITAT

This flamingo is found in the Caribbean, part of Central America, northeastern South America and in the Galapagos Islands. One of the primary breeding sites of the Caribbean flamingo is found in the Yucatan in Mexico. A chick from the Yucatan that was banded several years ago recently turned up in Florida, demonstrating that these birds do sometimes travel long distances.

## DESCRIPTION

Also called the American flamingo, this species is the most brightly colored and largest of all flamingos. They are a scarlet pink color overall and have black primary feathers. Their bill is downward bending at its midpoint. They have large bodies and flexible long necks topped with a small head. The flamingo's long legs and feet are bare, and their toes are webbed, which is good for wading. Young birds are mostly grey and do not develop their characteristic pink until after the first year. The sexes are similar in appearance.

## DIET

In the wild, Caribbean flamingos primarily eat algae, crustaceans and tiny mollusks. The pink plumage color comes from the carotenoids in their food. Without these, the flamingo's feathers would be white.

## EARLY STAGES of LIFE

Caribbean flamingos nest in huge colonies on truncated cones of mud. These cones are about 12 inches tall. A single white egg is laid in the slightly concave top of the mud cone. Both female and male share in incubation that lasts about 28 days. The chick is covered with white down at hatching which turns to gray in about 3 weeks. The bill of the chick is straight and the chick

has short, thick legs. It can take 24-26 hours after an egg first pips until the chick completely emerges from the egg. Flamingo parents feed their chicks with a liquid secreted from the upper digestive tract that is similar to pigeon "milk" and has a very high nutritional value. It is similar in fat and protein content to mammal milk.

### **BEHAVIOR**

Caribbean flamingos are extremely gregarious and live in huge colonies. They appear to be monogamous. Flamingos have a diverse set of displays that they tend to perform as a group, these include "head-flagging" and "wing salutes". These communal displays serve to synchronize hormonal cycling for breeding.

### **INTERESTING FACTS**

Flamingos have long, featherless legs with webbed feet which permit wading. The downward curved bill allows feeding on the bottom. Uniquely among birds, the flamingo is a filter feeder, like the baleen whales. It takes in a quantity of water, which is then expelled trapping the shrimp, other invertebrates and foods in comb-like filtering structures in the bill called lamellae.