

# Greater Flamingo

## Grootflamink

### *Phoenicopus ruber*

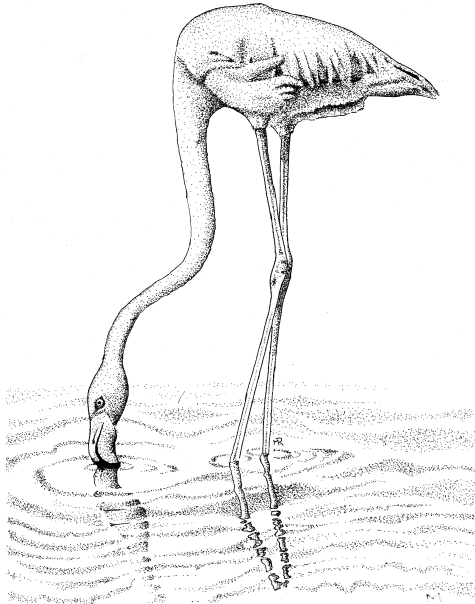
Southern African Greater Flamingos belong to the Old World race *P. r. roseus* whose total population is *c.* 800 000 birds; they breed at *c.* 25 localities in Africa, around the Mediterranean Sea and from the Middle East to India. The nominate race occurs in the Caribbean (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The species is widespread along the southern African coast, with conspicuous gaps in southern Namibia and from east of Algoa Bay (3326CD) to Durban Bay (2931CC). The distribution over the Free State and southern Transvaal closely matches the distribution of endorheic pans (Allan *et al.* 1995c). There are scattered records from wetlands in the central Cape Province, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The distribution map masks the extreme focus on a few localities, notably coastal wetlands in Namibia, the southwestern Cape Province, and at Lake St Lucia. Large numbers were reported in the early 1970s in northern Botswana, with 65 000–100 000 birds at Lake Ngami in December 1971 and *c.* 300 000 at the Makgadikgadi Pans in November 1974 (Dawson & Jacka 1975; Parker 1975).

The principal breeding localities are Etosha Pan and Sua Pan in the Makgadikgadi. These localities support up to *c.* 26 000 pairs (Berry 1972; Liversedge 1989). These probably form one population which selects the locality with the better breeding conditions. Elsewhere in southern Africa, breeding is erratic; localities are Lake Ngami (2022B) (Andersson & Gurney 1872; Fraser 1971); Bredasdorp (3420CC) in 1960 with 1600 adults and 350 fledglings (Uys *et al.* 1961, 1963; Uys & Macleod 1967); and Lake St Lucia (2832CB) in 1972 with 4000 young from 6000 nests (Porter & Forrest 1974). At least six other breeding attempts in the Transvaal, Free State and Cape Province apparently did not produce fledglings (Brooke 1984b).

**Habitat:** Its favoured foraging areas are open shallow eutrophic wetlands (Brooke 1984b). It occasionally forages along sandy coasts. It feeds mainly on small invertebrates (crustaceans, dipterid larvae, etc.) filtered from water with a depth range of 70–130 cm. It usually breeds colonially on mudflats in large pans inaccessible to mammalian predators and lacking feeding perches for raptors.

**Movements:** Breeding localities, and most inland pans, dry up during winter, forcing flamingos to move to coastal wetlands. In years of poor rains, many birds remain at the coast through the summer. Along the Namibian coast, flamingos moving to breeding grounds fly northwards over inshore waters in the late afternoon, and move inland after dark. At 50–60 km/h the flamingos reach Etosha Pan, about 500 km inland, before daybreak. Pans in Bushmanland provide stopover sites *en route* to the Makgadikgadi Pans. Birds colliding with overhead power lines in Zimbabwe are thought to be on a flight path between the Makgadikgadi and coastal wetlands in Mozambique (Mundy & Chabikwa 1991). What triggers movement, for example from the rainless coast of the Namib Desert to inland pans, is not known. Vernon (1986a) pointed out that rainfall over much of southern Africa is produced by thunderstorms, and the associated lightning, visible at night over several hundred kilometres, may be a visual cue.

**Breeding:** It breeds after summer rains have filled saline pans, and disperses once these dry out. Numbers at Walvis Bay (2214DC) are, on average, minimal in late February and March



and maximal June–November (A.J.W. pers. obs). Elsewhere numbers vary with local wetland conditions.

**Interspecific relationships:** It often occurs with the Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*, but feeds on larger food items, less frequently at night and in also in less calm water. It breeds at less saline sites, and earlier than the Lesser Flamingo. White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus* may displace breeding flamingos once the latter have shown a breeding locality to be safe (Berry *et al.* 1973). Marabou Storks *Leptoptilos crumeniferus* are major predators at colonies in East Africa (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no evidence of historical change in distribution, or of a decrease in numbers, but all flamingo populations are under stress (Brooke 1984b; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). It is im-

perative that the few critical breeding localities are protected; all forms of disturbance, including low-flying aircraft, need to be minimized during breeding. At both breeding and nonbreeding localities, threats include pollutants, fences across waterbodies and nearby utility lines, and developments at and around wetlands (Hall 1983; Brooke 1984b). A veterinary cordon fence through Sua Pan forms a serious obstacle for chicks following receding water on foot (M. Herremans pers. comm.). Construction of saltworks, which provide permanent shallow feeding areas, has been beneficial, but at inland localities this could damage traditional breeding sites. Natural problems occur through fluctuating water-levels at breeding localities; excessive water may flood nests, and premature dry-down provides predators access to breeding colonies, or traps chicks in saline mud.

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Recorded in 677 grid cells, 14.9%

Total number of records: 7589

Mean reporting rate for range: 11.7%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types

