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Family Phoenicopteridae

South American Flamingos

Flamencos y Parinas

Phoenicoparrus jamesi Sclater
Phoenicoparrus andinus Philippi
Phoenicoparrus ruber chilensis Molina

See Vol I pp 156-175:

In our Volume I we gave an account of our experiences with the three species of South American Flamingos and attempted to summarize what we had been able to find out regarding their distributions, movement, habits, and status within Chilean territory. We concluded by saying that we were the first to recognize how much still remained to be done and that extensive field research must be carried out in Bolivia, Peru and Argentina before the record could be considered anywhere near complete.

Thanks in large measure to the efforts of Mr. Charles Cordier, who has been living in Bolivia for the last three years, we are now in a position to give additional information concerning these birds from what is now seen to be their main centre of distribution - the high altitude pleateau country of western Bolivia, with secondary ramifications across the political borders into southwestern Peru, northern Chile and northwestern Argentina. Apart from northern Chile, this entire area comes within our definition of "adjacent regions" and consequently within the scope of the present work.

Mr. Cordier has made frequent visits to possible flamingo habitats at different times of the year, both in Bolivia and S.W. Peru, and has reached the following conclusions:

a) The main wintering grounds of all three species are on or around the two large lakes and salt-marshes of Poopó and Coipassa, situated in the Department of Oruro, Bolivia. The population of each species runs into hundreds of thousands, that of Ph. chilensis outnumbering either of the other two by about 4 to 1. Mr. Cordier estimates the total population of the Chilean Flamingo in Bolivia at one million birds and those of Ph. andinus and Ph. jamesi at from 250.000 to 300.000 each.

Apparently neither of these large bodies of water are used regularly for breeding purposes, although occasionally one or another species may do so in relatively small numbers.

b) Large concentrations running into many thousands of flamingos may also be observed during the winter months on several high-altitude lakes in the Depts. of Puno, Arequipa and Ayacucho, Peru, but these are made up almost entirely of Ph. chilensis with only very small numbers of Ph. andinus and Ph. jamesi. The only nesting colony found in Peru was a large one of Ph. chilensis located on an island in a fresh water lake in the Dept. of Puno at an altitude of 14.000 feet.

c) The main breeding ground of Ph. jamesi is undoubtedly at Laguna Colorada, Dept. of Potosí, where we found the first known nesting colony in January 1957.

Consequently any measures aimed at protecting the species should start at this lake where, for many years, they have been subject to repeated and systematic egg-raiding by the local inhabitants and, latterly, to large scale and sometimes indiscriminate trapping for export to American and European Zoos.

d) Secondary breeding grounds of Ph. jamesi exist at various other lakes or lagoons in the Depts. of Oruro and Potosí, Bolivia, but these are mostly occupied by the other two species, with Ph. chilensis predominating.

e) Information from local inhabitants indicated there are also small mixed nesting colonies including Ph. jamesi on a lake near the Bolivia - Argentina border and at Lake Vilama in the Argentine province of Jujuy. Apparently these are also subject to systematic egg-raiding.

f) Up to the present Mr. Cordier has failed to find either Ph. jamesi or Ph. andinus anywhere below 10.000 feet, this confirming our own experience and conclusions in this respect.

Apart from the Systematic egg-raiding at their nesting colonies and the hazards represented by the wide fluctuations from year to year in water levels, while on their wintering grounds the flamingos are subject to active predation from the Morato indians at lake Poopó and the Chipayas at lake Coipasa. Both these tribes catch them by laying noose-traps at night along stretches of water where they retire, and in addition the Chipayas bring them down from the air with "bolas", a kind of sling or lasoo similar to that used by the "Gauchos" of Argentina for catching rheas.

They are used for food and also for their feathers which are sold as dance ornaments, those of Ph. jamesi bringing the highest price and Ph. chilensis the lowest. In late summer the Chipayas also scour the countryside on newly acquired bicycles looking for chreches of young flamingos which they round up, drive to the shore and slaughter for their fat, which is boiled down and finds a ready sale as a remedy for tuberculosis.

Groups of up to 1.500 flamingos unable to fly because they are moulting their wing feathers are also driven ashore and slaughtered. The species which is most easily driven is Ph. chilensis, fortunately the most numerous.

It would seem that there is little that can be done to stop such practices on the part of these indigenous tribes as they live at a bare subsistence level by fishing and trapping and their hunting rights so back to the times of the Spanish conquest of South America.

The situation at Laguna Colorada however is quite different and with the cooperation of the Bolivian Government and some help from abroad, should not be too difficult to remedy. Laguna Colorada itself is uninhabited and the egg-raiding is done by inhabitants of Peña Barroso or Quetena Chico and Quetena Grande, two villages some 45 and 60 kilometers east of Laguna Colorada.

It is encouraging to learn that the Bolivian Wildlife Service is alive to the situation and as a first step has declared Laguna Colorada a National Park area and stationed a guard there. If this could be followed up by an agreement limiting the taking of eggs to the first laying only and a little financial assistance given to the villagers to compensate them for their loss of income through the reduced sale of eggs, it should surely be possible to build up the James' Flamingo population within a comparatively few years, even if the egg-raiding at minor colonies continues.

Considering that most of James' flamingos now in American or European Zoos have come from Laguna Colorada, it is reasonable to expect that these institutions would be willing to cooperate in an effort to preserve the species, especially seeing that so much could be accomplished with very little money. The next paying season will start in December 1967.

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