

## Long-legged Pink Things: What are they? Where do they come from?

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Pearson et al. (1942), Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949), and the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list* (1957, 1983) consider the records of Greater [American] Flamingos<sup>1</sup> in the Carolinas as naturally occurring vagrants. The primary South Carolina records are ones provided by Audubon (1840-1844) and Wayne (1887). The Audubon record is somewhat vague. "A very few of these birds have been known to proceed eastward of the Floridas beyond Charleston in South Carolina, and some have been procured there within eight or ten years back." Wayne's record is of a young, storm-driven male killed on DeBardien Island in September 1876. The specimen was not saved. Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949) cite an apparent "tongue in cheek" news clipping from the *Charleston Courier* on 20 July 1818 providing evidence of an even earlier record. It states, "We hope that they [other migrating birds] will meet with better reception than the unfortunate flamingo who recently paid us the honor of a visit from South America, but before he arrived in the metropolis, was slain at John's Island by a man who mistook him for a British soldier." The news article states that the bird was placed in the Charleston Museum, but by 1949 there was no record of its existence. Other records of flamingos available for South Carolina are provided in Table 1.

In North Carolina the earliest record was made by the manager of the Pea Island Refuge, Samuel A. Walker, of two birds he saw on the beach on 23 June 1937 (Chat 1:61). Subsequently there have been a modest number of additional records of flamingos in coastal North Carolina (see Table 1).

It is interesting to note that in every instance the birds in question are credited to be the Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), although in every written account there is a complete lack of supporting details that describe any of the birds. The single exception is Ames (1965), who notes the bird he saw was "very pink." It is therefore safe to surmise that in each case the specific identification was based entirely on geographic probability.

With the above in mind, it is informative to note the two North Carolina records for which we have photographic evidence. In both cases the birds are not the expected American Flamingo of northern South America, the Antillies, and the Bahamas, but the Chilean Flamingo (*P. chilensis*). Six colored photographs supplied to me by Charles Peterson of Richlands, N.C., are clearly of the pale-plumaged, pink-kneed Chilean species (Fig. 1). This bird was photographed between 5 and 25 February 1986 near New River Inlet, Onslow County, N.C. James Parnell re-examined his photograph of a North Carolina flamingo that he took nearly 10 years before in the same area and discovered that it, too, was the Chilean species. Based on location, perhaps it is even the same individual.

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<sup>1</sup>The revised AOU name is somewhat misleading in that combining the Old World *Phoenicopterus roseus* as a race of the New World *P. ruber* blurs for many the fact that the two populations are quite distinctive. Both are now labeled Greater Flamingos. Although not all authors are in agreement concerning this combination, *P. ruber*, *roseus*, and *chilensis* are clearly of close affinity.

This discovery of a "second" species of flamingo in the Carolinas raises several questions, most of which cannot be answered with certainty. Are the birds simply escaped individuals from captive stocks? This cannot be determined, but it is unlikely that the pre-1900 South Carolina records are of captives. The gale-driven bird reported by Wayne (1887), for example, was almost certainly wild. With the documentation of the Chilean Flamingo in the area, how do we deal with earlier records of the American Flamingo? Ames's (1965) bird was reported as very pink, suggesting his bird was not the Chilean species. However, this alone is not the criterion with which we can allow any species on a state list. Furthermore, to someone not familiar with flamingos, even adults of the Chilean species could be considered as very pink.

While it at first seems absurd to consider that Chilean Flamingos in North Carolina may be wild, this needs to be thought through. Many of the recent records, including the ones we know to be Chilean birds, are from winter and spring, a time of year that seems backwards from that when one would expect a southern hemisphere species to be moving northward. Backwards may be the operative word. Mark (1984) discussed the role of "mirror-image" navigational error in migrating birds. South American species such as Variegated Flycatchers (*Empidonum varius*), Fork-tailed Flycatchers (*Muscirora tyrannus*), Tropical Kingbirds (*Tyrannus melancholicus*), Streaked Flycatchers (*Myiodynastes maculatus*), and Large-billed Terns (*Phaetusa simplex*) have all been recorded from North America (Abbott and Finch 1978, McLaughlin 1979). Most of these North American records are of fall/winter temperate migratory South American birds including the "Tropical" Kingbirds seen in the Carolinas in 1985 (North Carolina: 1985 Christmas Bird Count, Amer. Birds 40:270; South Carolina: Lee and Horner in press). Although the precise taxonomic identity of the two Carolina Tropical Kingbirds was not determined, a bird from Scarborough, Maine, taken early in this century was *Tyrannus m. chloronotus*, a migratory South American race. In that the Chilean Flamingo is migratory, moving south in the austral spring to its major breeding areas, some North American records may be the result of "mirror-image" navigational error (i.e. birds moving north in our fall). Along the same line, escaped individuals displaced in North America could likewise exhibit similar navigational error and be moving north in our fall.

Ryan (1979) summarized information on known captive flamingos in this country. At that time there were 417 Greater [American], 266 Chilean, 24 Greater [Eurasian], 26 Lesser (*P. minor*), 22 Puna (*P. james*), and 7 Andean Flamingos (*P. andinus*) in the United States as well as an unknown number of unmonitored birds. Of all the monitored birds, only one bird, a Chilean Flamingo in Orlando, Florida, has been reported as missing since 1974. This information is interesting in that it indicates a tremendous potential for occurrence of exotic birds in the wild; but the majority of the captives are pinioned, and there is no evidence that a significant number of captives are escaping. I have chosen not to attempt to summarize records of flamingos from other adjacent areas in that (1) they will provide no evidence one way or another to the problem of origin and (2) most records have the same problem as the Carolina ones, namely there is no way to be certain which species is involved.

Examination of the dates of occurrence of flamingos in the Carolinas is also informative. Combining all records, there are two distinct periods in which the birds are showing up on our coast—4 November through 25 February (with an additional record for an unknown date in March) and 10 June through 1 August (1 September if the storm-driven

TABLE 1. Flamingo records for the Carolinas.

Date	Locality	Source	Remarks
1818	near Charleston, S.C.	Sprunt and Chamberlain 1949	
pre-1840	N to Charleston, S.C.	Audubon 1840-1844	
Sept. 1876	near Charleston, S.C.	Wayne 1887	storm driven
June 1935	Pea Island, N.C.	NCSM records	2 birds for several days
23 June 1937	Pea Island, N.C.	Pearson et al. 1942	2 birds
6 July 1951	Buxton, N.C.	NCSM records	5 birds
5-14 Dec. 1964	Pea Island, N.C.	Ames 1965	
12 Nov. 1969	Pea Island, N.C.	NCSM records	present for 3 days
March 1972	Pea Island, N.C.	NCSM records	2 reports
4-24 Nov. 1972	Pea Island, N.C.	Chat 37:29	through 27 Nov. (Pea Island reports)
9 June 1977	Bird Island N of Bull's Island, S.C.	Chat 42:16	2 birds
30 July-1 Aug. 1977	Morris Island near Charleston, S.C.	Chat 41:52	2 birds, photo (Fig. 2); both <i>P. chilensis</i>
8 May 1977	Morris Island near Charleston, S.C.	Chat 41:98	
12 June 1978	Ocracoke Inlet, N.C.	Chat 43:22	
winter 1978-79	Pea Island, N.C.	Chat 43:70	present throughout winter
10 June 1980	near Ocracoke, N.C.	Chat 45:20	
15-22 July 1980	Morgan Island, N.C.	Chat 45:20	
26 July 1980	Cedar Island, N.C.	Chat 45:20	
13 May 1981	Cape Island, S.C.	Chat 45:105	2 birds
5-25 Feb. 1986	near Topsail Island, N.C.	NCSM records	photo of <i>P. chilensis</i> (Fig. 1)
7 Jan. 1986	near Topsail Island, N.C.	J. Parnell	sight report of <i>P. chilensis</i>

Spring 1987



Fig. 1. A Chilean Flamingo was photographed in February 1986 in New River Inlet, N.C. The dark knee joint (red in life) and pale back are diagnostic. (Photo by Charles Peterson)

bird is included). Two of the winter records are photographs, and both are of *P. chilensis*. The summer records have a single photographic documentation, and it is not of the Greater Flamingo, as I expected, but also of *P. chilensis* (Fig. 2). Could it be that this species is moving into the Carolinas at different seasons because of innate programming that evolved in a different hemisphere? Do we have only this one species presently visiting the Carolinas on a regular basis? Were the pre-1900 birds Greater Flamingos? While flamingos recorded in the Carolinas in modern times should certainly be regarded as exotics, there are still some interpretive problems. If one considers the semi-domestic breeding birds in south Florida as a major source of vagrants in the Southeast, I do not know how these birds should be categorized. Greater Flamingos nested in the Florida Keys until at least 1938 (Sprunt 1954). Should free-flying, reproducing Greater Flamingos be regarded as a native restocked population? Restocked Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) raised from captive stocks of various genetic origins are, and will be, considered as wild native birds. The Chilean Flamingo, like other large flamingos, is a strong flyer and is equally capable of reaching North America as a naturally occurring South American migrant. Furthermore, its period of occurrence is more or less what would be expected if the birds do on occasion come to North America on their own power as a result of "mirror-image" navigational errors. Unfortunately, escaped captives certainly must account for some (and probably all) of the records of this species in North America, and they could quickly mask



Fig. 2. The Chilean Flamingo caught in flight above is one of two such birds photographed near Charleston, S.C., in the summer of 1977. The dark knee joint (red in the colored slide) is apparent on both birds. (Photo by Pete Laurie)

a pattern emerging from records of truly wild birds, whatever the species. Additionally, patterns of occurrence, if they exist, are further corrupted by field workers' failing to identify more than one species of bird.

At present there is little point in arguing the origin of free-flying flamingos. While a reservoir of captive birds provides a logical explanation of source, natural and semi-natural sources cannot be entirely ruled out for one or both species. Furthermore, even if one maintains that all contemporary occurrences of flamingos are from captive stocks of exotics, the birds themselves now appear to be regular, though uncommon, visitors to the Carolinas. As such, their specific identity, location, and seasons of appearance deserve documentation, and bird students should be encouraged to report sightings. We can anticipate, but not predict, future usefulness of cumulative records. For example, the early North Carolina record of a Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*) was naturally assumed by Pearson et al. (1942) to be of an escaped captive, but subsequent information from neighboring areas now indicates that this was probably not the case, and the state's records committee has re-evaluated the status of this species. Although state records committees find it necessary to withhold birds of questionable origin from official state lists, provisional (hypothetical) status does not make such species any less interesting subjects of study. Perhaps future students will conclude that the increase in local flamingo records is a result of the currently revived fashion of setting out pairs of decoys in front yards.

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### **American Swallow-tailed Kite Nesting in Hampton County, S.C.**

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On 28 May 1985 an American Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) nest was found at the Webb Wildlife Center, Hampton County, S.C. The Webb Center is a 2346-ha state-owned tract of open pinewoods and bottomland hardwoods adjacent to the Savannah River. The nest with sitting bird was in a 5-ha Loblolly Pine (*Pinus taeda*) stand surrounded by a Laurel Oak (*Quercus laurifolia*) and Switch Cane (*Arundinaria gigantea*) flat interspersed with Overcup Oak (*Q. lyrata*) and Swamp Tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica* var. *biflora*) sloughs. Three small fields totaling 4 ha occurred within 300 m of the nest. The nest was 390 m from the Savannah River swamp bottomland and 1.3 km from the river itself. The nearest water was an oxbow lake 390 m away.

The nest was near the top of a 36-m Loblolly Pine (52 cm DBH). The pine stand had been thinned to a basal area of 11.5 m<sup>2</sup>/ha several years previously. A seldom-traveled