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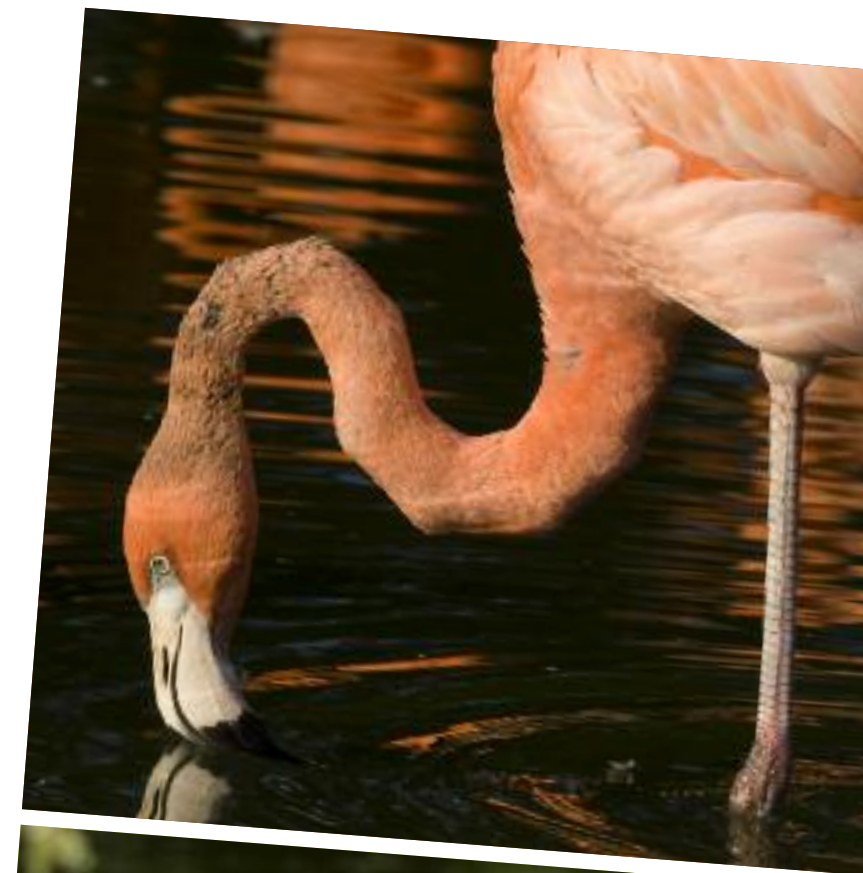
JULY

A year in the PINK

By Tom Wall, Bird Keeper
Photos by Ray Meibaum

On July 9, 2007, 15 American flamingos flew in to St. Louis—not by their wings, however, but by plane. You see, the birds were not yet hatched. They arrived as eggs in specially-designed holders to keep them nice and warm. This special care made sure their trip was, well, all it was cracked up to be. The eggs' transporters, Zoological Manager Anne Tieber and Bird Keeper Jim Deters, were, however, a bit tired after the trip. They flew to Miami from St. Louis at 6 a.m., received and packed the eggs, returned to the airport, flew back to St. Louis, transported the eggs to the quarantine area of the Animal Hospital, placed them into an incubator, then, finally, headed home to bed. That's one heck of a long flight with no wings!

The first little bundle of joy hatched on July 12, 2007. Weighing just three ounces, the downy white chick had to be kept warm in a brooder (heated) box. Ten more eggs successfully hatched over the next two weeks. As any new parent knows, our new bundles slept a lot, while those of us caring for them slept very little. In order for the birds to grow, they required five feedings per day. We fed them a specially mixed formula that provides all the nutrients that adult flamingos produce in their crop milk—a substance produced in the bird's upper digestive tract used to feed their young.





The first feedings were only a quarter- to a half-teaspoon of formula at each feeding. To make sure the birds kept the formula down, it had to be warmed to about 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The birds were fed the formula by a syringe with a long tube on it. We weighed them daily to make sure they were gaining the right amount of weight. As more birds hatched, more keepers became involved in helping to feed and weigh the birds. The feedings started at 7 a.m. and went every three hours until 7 p.m. Groups of two keepers were assigned several of the feedings each day. Quarantine Keepers Carol Fieseler and Jamie Palmer were a big help with

feedings and cleaning. Lucky for us—and the landfills—these little ones didn't require diaper changes!

Bird House staff who helped with the chicks' care include: Anne Tieber, Kate Karagiannis, Kim Washington, Katie Pope, Rachel Koch, Bird Curator Mike Macek and me, Tom Wall. The rest of the bird staff helped fill in for us in our daily duties while we tended to the chicks. They also kept us from nodding off from lack of sleep! This may sound like a lot of people for 10 birds, but in the wild, a pair of flamingos raises one chick between the two of them. Of course, unlike flamingo and human parents, we did get a couple days off every week.

The last flamingo chick hatched on July 25, 2007. This age gap between the first chick and the last chick helped us maintain a good age spread. Some of the older birds were down to three feedings a day, which gave us a bit of a break. The birds really grew quickly; they doubled their weight within ten days! The birds went from the brooder boxes to small enclosures with two or three chicks, water, food and large heat lamps to keep the birds warm. Eventually, as they grew, they were all integrated into one flock or "crèche" (groups of flamingo chicks).

Finally, a month after the last egg hatched, all the birds were old enough to move from quarantine to the indoor flamingo habitat in Cypress Swamp. They were already ten times their hatch weights! This area, where our flock of flamingos is housed in the winter, was modified for the little tykes. An area of

Flamingo Birthday Party

The flamingos' first Birthday Party was held on July 23, 2008. It was celebrated by giving the birds a few, well, interesting birthday cakes.

The Bird Department helped "bake" the cakes using part of the birds' regular diet, Flamingo Fare, and some other...yummy ingredients. Flamingo Fare is not only the birds' favorite food, but it also has a soft clay texture that makes it perfect for molding in to cake pans. The cakes consisted of two layers of Flamingo Fare, some krill (tiny shrimp-like crustaceans) "icing" and a frozen fish candle—Yum! When the big day came, the birthday boys and girls dug in to the cake with gusto!

The real gift that they received for their birthday was enrichment; the cake was a new and enriching way for them to enjoy their regular diet. We also put a water mister out for the afternoon to provide a shower and a mud puddle—which any one-year-old would love!



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the habitat was walled off—like a big play pen—and a pool was modified to hold only a few inches of water so the birds could access the water all the time. The birds still had an area with heat lamps above it so they could warm up if they got too cold in the water.

By now, the majority of the group was only being fed twice a day; a few of the younger chicks still required more feedings. The birds were starting to eat more and more of the adult diet mixed with water. We weighed the birds frequently to make sure that they were eating enough on their own to maintain their weight.

During the day, the birds were introduced to the larger pool so they could explore while we kept an eye on them. As they got better at getting in and out of the pool, they were given access day and night. When the birds were about three months old, they were all eating on their own and feathers had started to replace their white down.

The feathers were white and black; just a few feathers under their wings showed any pink. At this young age, the birds' livers are just beginning to be able to break down carotenoids, which make their feathers pink. (Carotenoids are fat soluble pigments that occur in plants like carrots. They are also found in krill and algae. Not only do carotenoids make carrots orange, they also make salmon and flamingos pink!)

As fall was ending, the adult flamingos on the North Lake, by the Mary Ann Lee Conservation Carousel, were brought indoors where the chicks were. We only brought a few birds in to see how the youngsters would respond to them. Everything went smoothly, so the other adults were moved in as well.

Spring finally sprung and adults were moved out to the North Lake. Once we were sure that temperatures were warm enough, the youngest additions to our flock were moved out as well. With a large lake, plants and an island to enjoy, the birds went about

excitedly exploring their new surroundings. It was great to see the birds enjoying their new habitat, but I also knew I would miss them. Fortunately, I can stop by the Lake to visit whenever I have a pang of empty nest syndrome.

Now that they are a year old, the youngsters have all turned a pale pink. They won't reach their full pink potential until next year. Then, they will molt into adult plumage and their light pink and gray spotted legs will start to darken up.

Be sure to stop by the North Lake to wish the newest additions to our flamingo flock a belated happy birthday before the birds are moved inside in mid-November! The easiest way to distinguish the juveniles from the adults is to compare their faces. Adult flamingos have a white stripe around the base of their bill that turns into a dark pink with a black tip. The chicks' bills are still a creamy light pink with a black tip. And, don't forget to come back next year to see how they've grown! ■