



Weltvogelpark Walsrode – Flamingo-Ritual

FOR THE PROTECTION AGAINST EURASIAN EAGLE OWLS

Dr. Antje Mewes
Andreas Frei
Jan Dams
Gerardus Scheres

The sun slowly sets down, turning the blue sky into a bright orange/red. There is an instant flash of blue color caused by the plumage of a native Common Kingfisher, quickly flying over the water and vanishing into the trees. The Weltvogelpark Walsrode closes in half an hour. There are hardly any visitors left in the park and a very romantic silence settles over the 24 ha large park area... Suddenly, a very loud and vivid, goose-like cackling penetrates the silence. An animal keeper, doing his last inspection round, parks his Caddy next to the flamingo enclosure. While getting off he claps his hands, shouting “Workday ends! Closing time!”. The cackling becomes louder and a graceful flamingo colony walks in single file, well-behaved like dogs, into an aviary. The animal keeper jumps sportive-elegant over the fence of the enclosure and closes the door of the aviary behind the flamingo colony.

Worldwide six different flamingo species exist: The Red Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber ruber*), which occurs in North- Middle- and South-America, the Chilean Flamingo

(*Phoenicopterus chilensis*), which also occurs in wide parts of South-America, the Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber roseus*), which is widespread in Africa, South-Europe and Asia, the Lesser Flamingo (*Phoeniconaias minor*), which only occurs in Africa, the Andean Flamingo (*Phoenicoparrus andinus*), which lives in South-America, in the high mountain regions of the Andes, and finally, the also in the Andes occurring James’ Flamingo (*Phoenicoparrus jamesi*).

Only few zoos keep and breed various flamingo species. The Weltvogelpark Walsrode presents three of the six species: Red, Chilean and Greater Flamingo. With more than 240 birds the Greater Flamingo colony is the biggest colony kept in European zoos. Although the different species can be kept in mixed colonies the Weltvogelpark Walsrode presents them separately. On the one hand hybrids shall be prevented and on the other hand the Weltvogelpark likes to emphasize the different species by clearly presenting them separately to the visitors.



(L to R) Greater Flamingo colony. Night camera shows a European Eagle Owl with a Flamingo chick. Greater Flamingos with the water hose.

Only since 60 years flamingos are bred successfully in zoological gardens. Since over 40 years also in the Weltvogelpark Walsrode. For the successful breeding it is necessary to keep the birds in a greatest possible colony, as existing in Weltvogelpark Walsrode. Due to the large colony the flamingos regularly come into breeding condition. Visitors have the opportunity to observe the magnificent courtship dances of the flamingos: They perform elegant movements with their heads and wings. A truly beautiful ballet performance! Once the right partner is found a pair bond lasts for the joint rearing of the offspring.

Only shortly before egg deposition flamingos start to build their distinctive nests. With the help of their bill they pile up a conical mud mound. The conical shape perfectly protects the single snow-white egg, laid in the middle of the mud mound. Both partners participate during nest building, breeding and rearing the offspring. After hatching, the chick has a dense, light grey, downy plumage. Flamingos are reared by their parents with a nutrient-rich crop exudate. This reddish crop milk contains blood cells, which is unique in the animal kingdom. After hatching, the chick remains 2-6 days in the nest. Once the juvenile has left the nest it is still cared for by its parents. Sometimes it is still fed by the parents till the next year. The chicks and their parents recognize each other—and find each other within the large colony—by their calls.

Such successful natural broods require that offspring are perfectly protected from predators. As in their natural habitat, where marabous or hyenas hunt for flamingos, predators also exist in our regions. Because of this, the complete park area is protected by an electric fence, which keeps foxes and other predators outside. Unexpectedly the Weltvogelpark nevertheless lost some of their young fluffy chicks. But how could this happen? At first, the Weltvogelpark team had no explanation. The installation of a camera should give an explanation. And, in fact, with the help of the camera it could be observed how an Eurasian Eagle Owl flew away—holding a flamingo chick in its claws.

Board Certified Avian Veterinarian



Dr. Greg Burkett
Member of the Assoc. of Avian Veterinarians since 1989.

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(L to R) Greater Flamingo juveniles during hand rearing. Greater Flamingos walk into the protection aviary. Red Flamingos walk into the protection aviary.

With an impressive size of 70 cm the Eurasian Eagle Owl is the largest owl species worldwide. At the end of the 20th century the eagle owl was almost eradicated from Germany. Especially overhunting and habitat loss, caused by extensive agricultural and forest exploitation, caused the continuous decrease of their population number. Meanwhile it was possible to observe the rare eagle owl in Weltvogelpark Walsrode: Berta, a 9 year old female enthuses the visitors during the flight show and one eagle owl couple can be admired in the themed world "owl castle".

Many protection measures and rewilderness programs luckily caused that the eagle owl population in Germany recovered. So it came that since lately two further eagle owls can be admired in the Weltvogelpark: A wild eagle owl couple, which lives in the forests bordering the park: Daily they hunt at dusk - close to the park area. Eagle owls hunt mainly for mice and rats and therefore eat away many vermins.

Of course, the Weltvogelpark team is very happy about the return of eagle owls to our home country. But obviously the electric protection fence around the park area does not prevent attacks from the air. Consequently, the park team had to remove eggs from the flamingo nests to save the offspring. The eggs were artificially incubated and juveniles subsequently hand reared.

After an incubation of approximately 30 days the chicks hatch. Afterwards, they are cared for by the animal keepers. For rearing, boiled egg yolk, diluted with an aqueous infusion solution, is used. The warmed up egg mixture is given to the chicks every 2-3 hours with the help of a syringe. After 2-3 weeks juveniles slowly get used to eat independently. For this, soaked Flamingo pellets (from the company Versele Laga) are offered in a bowl and taken little by little. Later the flamingos get only dry pellets, already containing the necessary red pigment carotin, which settles into their plumage, giving the flamingos their characteristic color. In the Weltvogelpark visitors have the unique opportunity to feed the flamingos exactly with this special pellets.

Even though the Weltvogelpark achieve very successful hand rearing rates, parental birds unfortunately lack the most wonderful activity: The lovingly rearing of their young. Furthermore, it is a pity to take the chance from visitors to observe the flamingos during engagement with their young.

2014 the park team had a new idea: On all three flamingo enclosures protection aviaries were built. Since then the elegant flamingos spend the night within the protection aviary, which secure them from hungry eagle owl attacks. Within the aviary, animal keepers regularly soak the ground with a water hose to provoke that the flamingos exclusively

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build their nests within the aviary. All three flamingo species were trained to follow the commando of their animal keepers: Clapping the hands twice is the signal for all flamingos to enter that part of the enclosure, which is protected by the newly build aviary. The training

needed some patience, but soon the social birds learned to follow the signal of clapping hands. Meanwhile they enter the protection aviary without any difficulties: It has become an every evening ritual. The associated loud cackling is important for the animals to keep the social group together.

To the visitors great delight the restructuring of the enclosures enabled that natural breeding of flamingos can be again experienced first-hand.

(Top row, L to R) Red Flamingos during mating. Red Flamingos during breeding. Red Flamingo juveniles.

(Bottom row, L to R) Chilean Flamingos during breeding. Chilean Flamingo juveniles during hand rearing.

After his inspection round, the animal keeper finally parks his Caddy in the garage. Now also his workday is ending. Meanwhile it is already getting dark. And from far away he can hear a bird calling: „huhuu“. It is an Eurasian Eagle Owl – it is hunting.