

Scientists to discover why flamingos are in the pink of health -- in the poo!

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A University of Leicester ecologist is setting out to discover why flamingos are so in the pink of health - in the poo! Dr David Harper, of the Department of Biology at the University of Leicester, has been studying lesser flamingos for nine years.

His research has been carried out in the lakes of East Africa but new investigations he has carried out for the first time in India have- by his own admission – given him ‘rather a shock.’

He said: “Lesser flamingos are graceful, majestic, birds. They are not the ones you can see at the zoo, because they are very difficult to maintain in captivity, but the ones that you see on television in their hundreds of thousands, crowded into a few specialist lakes in East Africa.

“I have been studying them, on these lakes in Kenya and Tanzania, but earlier this month I returned from India, having carried out a preliminary investigation of the population there, and I had rather a shock.

“In Africa the lesser flamingo, with its beautiful pink plumage, stands for everything that is pure and pristine. Many of the lakes where it feeds, occasionally with a million birds crowded together when the food is good, are almost untouched by man’s activities.

“In complete contrast to Africa, where lesser flamingos only live on inland soda lakes and are never seen at the coast, in India I watched 20,000 lesser flamingos happily feeding on tidal mudflats in front of an

oil refinery, a petrochemical plant and creeks bringing untreated waste from millions of people in the slums of Bombay.

“In Porbandar, the city which is the birthplace of Mahatma Ghandi, in Gujarat to the north of Bombay, I watched 8,000 standing knee deep and happily filtering-feeding in the water alongside rubbish, cowpats and wastewater running in from surrounding houses and factories.

“In western India and Gujarat in particular, people love flamingos – it is the state’s national emblem.”

Dr Harper was funded by the Darwin Initiative and now plans to write a full grant proposal to link with Indian universities and conservation groups to better understand how flamingos can thrive in waste water and how the peoples’ love of these birds can be turned into a love of everything natural.

Dr Harper added: “Bombay is on very low-lying land that once was just a few islands in the estuary, but now about 20 million people are crammed into this city. They need the estuary and all its ecology to help clean up their wastes and even protect them against flooding. We are planning to use the flamingo to help people understand the benefits of mud and mangroves – less pretty but far more useful to them”!

In Africa, Dr Harper and members of his team have satellite-tagged birds to find exactly where they go, studied their feeding and their behaviour and why sometimes several thousand die suddenly. His wife, Maureen, has used them as a teaching theme in schools near their lakes and written stories about them for the pupils. They have been funded by the UK Darwin Initiative, part of the British Government, which sends specialists from this country to help other countries, richer in biodiversity, protect their priceless natural heritage.

Dr Harper said: “The deaths of lesser flamingos in East Africa over the past 15 years have sometimes been blamed on poisoning from mankind’s industries or the consequence of too much fertiliser or human wastes in the lakes.

“But people who blame human wastes should go to India to see how well lesser flamingos thrive and how pink they grow, when they are surrounded by heavy industry and by water so polluted I could smell it a mile away!”

Source: University of Leicester

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