

Are flamingos returning to Florida?

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American Flamingos may be returning naturally to Florida after being extirpated over a century ago. Credit: J. Patterson

Flamingos are a Florida cultural icon, and sightings of American Flamingos in the state have been on the rise in recent decades. However, whether they're truly native to the U.S. or only arrive via escape from captivity has long been subject to debate, making developing a plan for

managing Florida's flamingo population challenging. A new study from *The Condor: Ornithological Applications* reviews the evidence and provides a fresh argument that the birds should be considered part of the Sunshine State's native fauna.

Zoo Miami's Steven Whitfield, along with colleagues from Audubon Florida's Everglades Science Center, the National Park Service, Big Cypress National Preserve, and the Rookery Bay Estuarine Research Reserve, reexamined the historical evidence of flamingos in Florida and evaluated the likely origins of birds seen in recent years. Overall, they conclude, the evidence from both narrative accounts and museum records suggests that American Flamingos once occurred naturally in large flocks in Florida and probably even nested there before being eliminated by hunting around 1900. From 1950 to the present, however, birdwatchers have reported almost 500 new observations of flamingos in Florida, with both flock size and the frequency of observations increasing over time. While it's plausible that some of these individuals could be escapees from captive flocks, there is also strong evidence for dispersal from wild populations in Mexico and the Caribbean.

The [population](#) history Whitfield and his coauthors describe is consistent with that of some native [species](#) already protected by state and federal endangered species laws, and they hope that their study will lead to a better plan for managing wild flamingos in Florida. "Living in Florida, you see flamingos everywhere—in advertising, in place names, even on the logo for the state lottery—but as an actual organism, as a species, there was essentially no information available on the biology of flamingos," says Whitfield. "Some biologists considered them native birds that were extirpated during the plume trade of the late 1800s, and urged for population recovery measures, while others considered the rare flamingos seen around Florida to be escapees from captive colonies. We often say that in south Florida we have just two types of species, introduced and endangered, but a species can't be both at the same time."

"This article finally sheds welcome light on status of these iconic birds in Florida. The authors meticulously researched historic records and compiled more recent sightings to reconstruct the history and population trends of flamingos in Florida," adds the American Museum of Natural History's Felicity Arengo, a [flamingo](#) conservation expert who was not involved in the study. "Flamingo numbers have increased notably since the 1950s due to protections to species and habitats in Florida and throughout the Caribbean. The authors are cautious and recognize the limitations of the data in their study, but they provide ample [evidence](#) that Florida was the northernmost extent of the American Flamingo prior to the early 1900s and that populations have been recovering."

More information: "Status and trends of American Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) in Florida, USA" [DOI: 10.1650/CONDOR-17-187.1](#)

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