

BOOK REVIEW

The Mystery of the Flamingos

By Leslie Brown

Country Life Ltd., London. 115 pages. 32 plates and coloured frontispiece from Mr. Brown's photographs. Date of publication, end of 1959. Anticipated Nairobi price, Shs. 25-30.

Many of the most exciting stories in literature are concerned with discovery in one form or another, and in the annals of ornithological discovery this book will, I am sure, rate high. It is a book of real adventure: the flamingos did indeed turn out to be birds of mystery, as the title implies, and the investigation developed into as fascinating a quest as any naturalist could dream of. As the pages unfold, Mr. Brown relates his story with skill—writing simply, humanly and with clarity. The beauty or grotesqueness of the flamingos' fascinating and little-known displays, the appalling grimness of certain of their chosen surroundings, the profound problems of population, longevity and movements, a gripping narrative of the Natron breeding quarters and a nightmare foot-excursion which nearly killed him—all hold the reader's attention all the time.

The book is concerned with the two species of flamingo found in Africa—the Greater (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) and the Lesser (*Phoeniconaias minor*). Odd to relate, when Mr. Brown began his investigations in 1951, surprisingly little was known about either species. For instance, there was no published record proving that the Greater had bred anywhere in Africa south of the Sahara, while the few breeding records for the Lesser were tenuous and vague. During the years 1951-9 Mr. Brown obtained excellent records of the breeding of both species and cleared up many other points in their life cycles, and what makes the achievement all the more remarkable is the fact that everything had to be done during the strictly limited spare time in a busy official life.

Quite early he decided that the only practicable method of studying the general movements and distribution of these birds was by covering the Rift Valley lakes in a light aeroplane, and for this purpose he actually learned to fly himself, which was (he explains) cheaper and nicer than hiring! It was from the air that he first discovered the huge breeding colonies of the Lesser—till then unknown—on Lake Natron, and except for air reconnaissance it is probable that they would have remained unknown, since they are too far from the shores to be clearly visible.

Lake Natron, it appears, is the only regular breeding ground of the Lesser discovered to date. In 1954 Mr. Brown estimated that 100,000-150,000 pairs were breeding here. That year he made a solitary attempt to walk out over the mud to visit one of these colonies, but the mud beat him and he felt lucky to escape alive, creeping back to shore in an exhausted condition with his feet terribly burned by the soda. There seemed to be little breeding in 1955-6, but 1957 was a tremendous year with an estimated total of nearly 600,000 pairs. Now he again attempted to reach nests on foot—this time with his admirable Mkamba helper, Njeru—and succeeded. These nests were of the orthodox mud-platform type.

Regarding the breeding of the Greater, Mr. Brown received the surprise of his life when he discovered some 5,000 pairs nesting at the end of 1956 on islets in Lake Elmenteita! The remarkable feature here was the fact that no mud was available on these islets and that the birds therefore made no attempt to construct orthodox nests, but merely used scrapes in the ground with a little lining! Unfortunately this colony was broken up by the depredations of a few Marabou Storks, but contrary to all precedent the Greaters nested here again in mid-1957 and in considerably larger numbers—over 9,000 pairs. Mr. Brown obtained excellent observations and photographs of these from a floating hide of ingenious and original design. A rather larger colony also nested on Natron.

In addition to his notes on breeding, Mr. Brown discusses a number of other topics which I can barely touch upon here. For instance, there may be six million flamingos in the world, of which over half live in East Africa (Lesser, three million; Greater, 20-50,000). There is cause to think that these birds live for a good many years and have very few natural enemies: hence, without some form of control, they might well tend to over-populate their environment, so perhaps the control is in the form of considerable irregularity in breeding?

Although the book is short it tells the story fully and there is a valuable appendix. The plates illustrate the text well and there are two good maps. Mr. Brown has already published two previous books—*Birds and I* (1947) and *Eagles* (1955). This, his third, maintains his high standard and cannot be too strongly commended.

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