

□ **READING CHALLENGE**

Why Flamingos Are Pink

*They are born grey, so how do they become the most colourful birds in the world?
The answer is in their food.*

Level	A2 — Elementary
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	Animals & Nature
Duration	~12-15 minutes
Skill	Reading
Vocabulary	15 words
Quiz	5 questions

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If you close your eyes and think of a flamingo, you probably see a tall, pink bird standing on one leg. Flamingos are one of the most famous birds in the world. People love them because of their beautiful colour. You can find flamingos on T-shirts, phone cases, swimming pool toys, and even birthday cakes. But here is a surprising fact: flamingos are not born pink. When a baby flamingo comes out of its egg, it is white and grey, just like a baby duck. So how does a grey baby bird become a bright pink adult? The answer is one of the most interesting stories in nature.

Born Grey

When flamingo chicks **hatch**, they are covered in soft, fluffy white or grey **feathers**. They look nothing like their bright pink parents. For the first few days, both the mother and father flamingo feed the baby with a special milk. Yes, flamingos make milk! It is called “crop milk” and it comes from inside the parent’s throat. This milk is red because it contains a lot of fat and **pigments**. The parents lose some of their pink colour when they are feeding their babies because they give away their pigments through the milk. After a few weeks, the parents can look almost white!

The baby flamingo stays grey for about one to two years. Slowly, as it starts eating the same food as its parents, its feathers begin to change colour. By the time it is two or three years old, the flamingo is fully pink. But what exactly is in their food that turns them pink?

You Are What You Eat

The secret to the flamingo’s pink colour is a **nutrient** called carotenoid. Carotenoids are natural pigments found in many plants and animals. They are the same chemicals that make carrots orange, tomatoes red, and autumn leaves yellow. Flamingos get carotenoids from the food they eat: tiny shrimp, algae (small water plants), and small insects that live in lakes and **wetlands**.

When a flamingo eats these foods, its body breaks down the carotenoids and sends the pigments to its feathers, **beak**, and legs. Over time, the pigments build up and turn the bird pink. If a flamingo stops eating food with carotenoids, it will slowly lose its colour and become white or pale grey. This is why flamingos in **captivity** — in zoos, for example — sometimes look less pink than wild flamingos. Zookeepers have to add carotenoids to the birds’ food to keep them bright and colourful.

Eating Upside Down

Flamingos have one of the strangest ways of eating in the animal world. They eat with their head **upside down**. A flamingo bends its long neck down, puts its head into the water so that its beak points backwards, and then moves its head from side to side. Inside the beak, there are special thin plates that work like a **filter**. Water goes in, and the beak catches tiny shrimp, algae, and insects. The flamingo pushes the water out with its tongue and swallows the food.

This is similar to how a whale eats. Whales also filter small animals from the water. But flamingos do it in **shallow** water, often in lakes and lagoons where the water only reaches their knees. Flamingos spend many hours each day with their head in the water, walking slowly and filtering food. It is hard work, but this is how they get the carotenoids that keep them pink.

Why Do They Stand on One Leg?

The other famous thing about flamingos is that they often stand on one leg. You have probably seen photos of flamingos sleeping while balanced on a single thin leg. Scientists have studied this for many years, and they have several ideas about why flamingos do this.

The most popular theory is that it helps them save body heat. Flamingos often stand in cold water for a long time. If they keep both legs in the water, they lose more heat. By lifting one leg up against their body, they keep it warm and lose less energy. Another idea is that standing on one leg is actually easier for flamingos than standing on two legs. Studies have shown that flamingos use almost no muscle effort when they stand on one leg — their bones lock into position, so they can balance without trying. It is like how you can lean against a wall without using much energy. A dead flamingo can even stay standing on one leg, because it is the bones, not the muscles, that hold the position!

Living Together

Flamingos are very social birds. They live in huge groups called **flocks**. Some flocks have thousands or even millions of birds. The largest flamingo flocks live in East Africa, around lakes in Kenya and Tanzania. Lake Nakuru in Kenya is famous for having up to two million flamingos at one time. When you see photos from above, the lake looks completely pink.

Living in a big group has many advantages. It is harder for predators — animals that hunt other animals — to attack one flamingo when it is surrounded by thousands of others. Flamingos also need to be in a group to find a **mate**. Before mating season, flamingos do a group dance. They walk together, turn their heads from side to side, and stretch their wings to show their colours. The pinker the flamingo, the healthier it is, and the more attractive it is to a mate. So being pink is not just about food — it is also about finding love!

Six Types of Flamingo

There are six **species** of flamingo in the world, and they live on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. The greater flamingo is the biggest. It can be up to 150 centimetres tall — as tall as many adult humans. The lesser flamingo is the smallest but the most common, with millions living in Africa. The Andean flamingo and the James's flamingo live high in the mountains of South America, near salt lakes at 4,000 metres above sea level. The Chilean flamingo lives in South America too, and the American flamingo — the brightest pink of all — lives in the Caribbean, Mexico, and the southern tip of Florida.

Each species lives in a different **habitat**, but they all share the same basic diet of shrimp, algae, and small water creatures. Some species **migrate** — they fly to warmer places when winter comes. Flamingos are strong fliers. They can fly at speeds of 55 to 65 kilometres per hour and can travel up to 600 kilometres in a single night. Many people do not know that flamingos can fly because they usually see them standing still in zoos.

Flamingos and Humans

Humans have been fascinated by flamingos for thousands of years. The ancient Romans ate flamingo tongues as an expensive food. In some parts of South America, people used to believe that flamingo fat could cure certain diseases. Today, flamingos are mostly loved and protected, but they still face problems. Climate change, pollution, and the destruction of wetlands are making it harder for flamingos to find food and safe places to live. When lakes dry up because of global warming, flamingos lose their habitat and must travel further to find food.

The good news is that many countries now protect flamingo habitats. In places like the Camargue in southern France, the Andes mountains, and the lakes of East Africa, conservation projects are helping flamingo populations grow. Scientists study flamingos by putting small rings on their legs so they can track where the birds go and how long they live. Flamingos can live for 40 to 60 years in the wild, and some flamingos in zoos have lived past 80!

Next time you see a flamingo — in a zoo, in a photo, or maybe even in the wild — remember that its beautiful pink colour is not something it was born with. Every pink feather on its body came from the food it ate. In a way, flamingos really are what they eat. And that is what makes them one of the most amazing birds on the planet.

Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	hatch	to come out of an egg; to be born from an egg
2	feather	one of the soft, light things that cover a bird's body
3	beak	the hard, pointed mouth of a bird
4	shallow	not deep; with very little water
5	pigment	a natural substance that gives colour to something
6	flock	a large group of birds or animals that stay together
7	species	a group of animals or plants that are the same kind
8	filter	to separate small things from liquid by passing it through something
9	mate	a partner; an animal's husband or wife for making babies
10	habitat	the natural place where an animal or plant lives
11	upside down	with the top part at the bottom and the bottom part at the top
12	wetland	an area of land that is very wet or covered with water
13	nutrient	a substance in food that helps living things grow and stay healthy
14	captivity	the state of being kept in a zoo, cage, or enclosed area; not free
15	migrate	to move from one place to another, usually when the season changes

Comprehension Quiz

1. What colour are flamingos when they are born?
 - A) Pink
 - B) White and grey
 - C) Red
 - D) Orange

2. What makes flamingos turn pink?
 - A) The sun changes their feather colour
 - B) They drink pink water
 - C) A pigment called carotenoid in the food they eat
 - D) They are born pink but become darker with age

3. How do flamingos eat?
 - A) They catch fish by diving into deep water
 - B) They put their head upside down in the water and filter food with their beak
 - C) They eat seeds and insects from the ground
 - D) Other birds bring food to them

4. Why do flamingos stand on one leg?
 - A) Because one leg is broken
 - B) Scientists are not completely sure, but it may help them save body heat
 - C) Because the water is too hot for both legs
 - D) They are dancing to attract other flamingos

5. What happens to flamingos in zoos if they do not eat the right food?
 - A) They become much bigger than wild flamingos
 - B) They can lose their pink colour and become pale or white
 - C) They cannot fly anymore
 - D) They stop eating completely

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	What colour are flamingos when they are born?
2	C	What makes flamingos turn pink?
3	B	How do flamingos eat?
4	B	Why do flamingos stand on one leg?
5	B	What happens to flamingos in zoos if they do not eat the right food?