

Breeding the Rosy or Caribbean Flamingo at the Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge

It was not until 1961 that it was decided to add flamingos to the waterfowl collection at Slimbridge. We made a start by having some 12 Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber chilensis* which were put into our South American Pen. These were followed by Greater and Lesser Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber roseus* and *Phoeniconaias minor* from Kenya, which went to our African enclosure. The Rosy Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber ruber*, which we were most anxious to have, were extremely difficult to come by, and our first birds were a fine pair presented by Antwerp Zoo. Somewhat later we were able to add a consignment from a Florida pet store. It was necessary to learn as much as possible about the husbandry of these beautiful birds, so we sought information from all the Zoos and Collections that kept flamingos. Perhaps the most significant

remark was 'Not to worry, it will be seven years before you breed them'—and indeed this proved to be true. But in the meantime we went to a great deal of trouble to give them the right feed. Everyone seemed to have different ideas, but we have evolved a 'flamingo soup' that seems satisfactory for keeping the birds not only in good condition but also in good colour. Initially we bought meals and whole dried shrimps and mixed them together in our cement mixer! We now have a proper food mill and through this are putting equal quantities of wheat, whole maize, poultry biscuit, turkey starter crumbs and dried shrimp. To this is added minced carrot, beetroot and lettuce, along with Canthaxanthin and Rhodophyl for colour maintenance. Special concrete feeding basins were constructed and these are regularly and scrupulously cleaned.

At the same time we were busy working out what we thought would be ideal nesting conditions for all the flamingos, and 'atolls' were built in the middle of their ponds. These consist principally of a concrete ridge forming an oval or circle, rising from the bottom of the pond at a gentle angle and enclosing an area of soft mud out of which they could build the mounds that form their nests. Some concrete 'nests' were added to give the birds the right idea.

The Rosy Flamingos were the first species to show any signs of breeding in 1966, one or two nests were built but these were only half-hearted attempts. Similarly in 1967, although the activity was a little greater and indeed extended to the Chilean Flamingos, it was not the breeding year. However, at the beginning of May 1968 nest building was commenced in earnest by the Rosy Flamingos. Sixteen nests in all were constructed and on the 15th May the first egg was laid. A second bird laid on the 19th. (Plate XVa, p. 165). Entry into the pen was forbidden, the vegetation was allowed to grow rank although overlooked by the restaurant, the nettles proliferated and none of the ducks' nests was visited. But we had forgotten one thing, and that was the periodic cleaning of the restaurant windows. On 7th June the window cleaners came when no member of the staff was near and took their ladders into the pen. Immediately the flamingos left their nests but fortunately a visitor in the restaurant saw this happen and sent for staff help. Needless to say the window cleaners were asked to leave immediately. The birds then returned to their nests but the bird which had been second to lay proceeded to push its egg out of its nest. It was replaced but again was turned out. By this time we felt that much more disturbance would cause the other bird, which had started to incubate again, to leave also. So a wooden egg was placed in the second bird's nest but it would not even tolerate this. Its good egg, which measured 99.6×56.0 mm., was put in our incubator as a last hope. We felt the chances of rearing a day old flamingo were remote—even if the egg did hatch—for the birds feed their young by regurgitation and to reproduce the kind of food so supplied seemed to be impossible. However, to our surprise, on listening to the egg on 15th June, there was a distinct tapping and indeed a faint squeak. What to do? It was decided that we must test the egg that was under the first flamingo. It was still being incubated but was overdue for

hatching, and we had to see if it were alive. It was obvious on handling the egg, which measured 91.7×55.7 mm., that it was addled, so it was removed and the tapping egg substituted in the nest.

On 16th June the male was observed to be incubating with its tail held more erect than previously. The chick finally emerged from the egg between 17.00 and 20.00 hrs. The female 'nibbled' the chick persistently, especially round head and bill, for 15 minutes after preening herself. Similar attention was later shown by the male.

The chick's legs were bright pinkish-red, the bill a flesh pink with darker tip. At 11.25 on 18th June the chick attempted to stand, helping itself up with bill pressed on to the nest and wings held down with head shaking. Finally it stood for a short period. By the tenth day many of the chick's movements had an adult quality. Thus it bowed head forward with wings outstretched after preening. It also stretched its wings and leg sideways and jumped about (see Plate XVb and XVI).

The chick left the nest and fed itself at the food tray on 2nd July at 16 days of age. For a great deal of this time we had the most dreadful weather with torrential rain, and the chick at various times seemed to be covered with mud in spite of the parent brooding it. However, it survived and has now grown into a fine bird. For a considerable time after leaving the nest it took most of its food from its parents. They were obviously being debilitated, particularly the male, for they were completely drained of their lovely pink colour and became virtually like the European Greater Flamingo, with which they are considered conspecific. We therefore decided to remove the young bird at the age of 11 weeks, before the strain on the parents became too great. It was returned after three weeks' absence and from then on the parents appeared to take no interest in it, and the bird fended for itself. During the autumn the parents, or perhaps one should say the foster parents, gradually returned to their full colour, the young bird progressed well, and in five months time was beginning to go pink. At this stage it was decided that the one and only flamingo to be reared in Britain ought not to fly away, so we caught and pinioned it. This was duly done without any ill effect and now it is a happy member of our flock of 37 Rosy Flamingos.

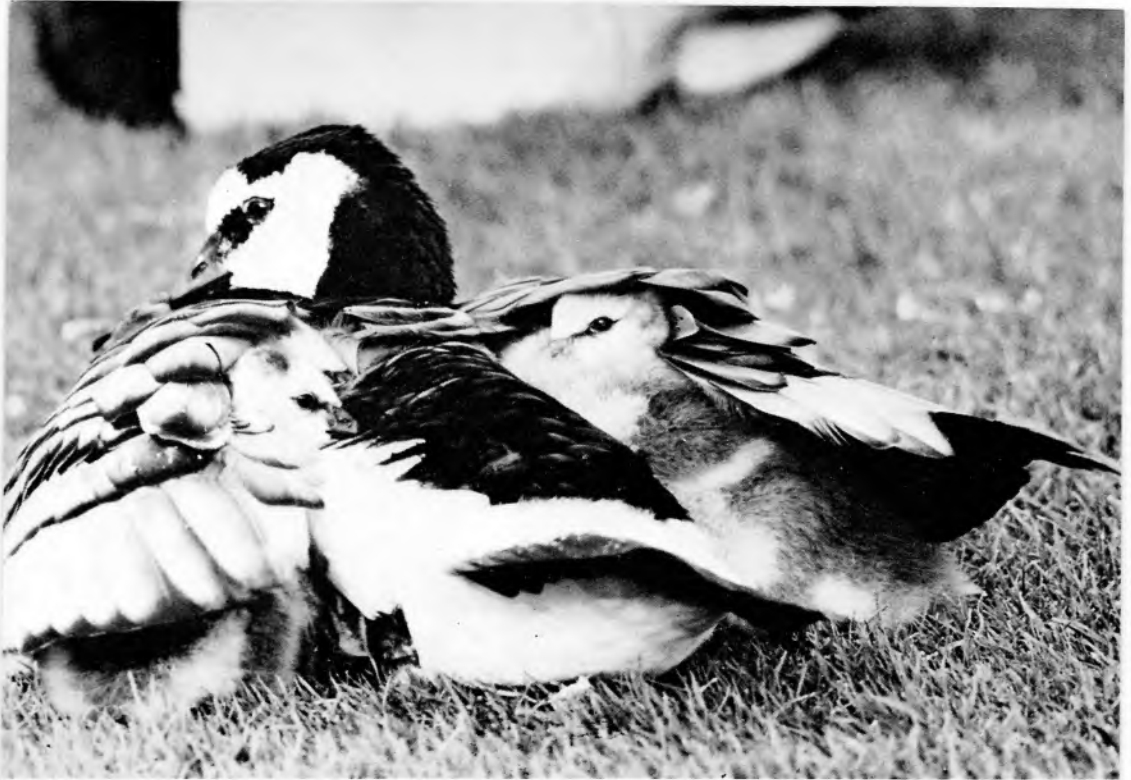


Philippa Scott

- Plate XIII. (a) A downy Crested Screamer *Chauna chavaria* and its parent sharing a meal.
 (b) A brood of Maned Geese *Chenonetta jubata* with their bantam foster mother. This species bred for the first time at Slimbridge in 1968.

Philippa Scott





Philippa Scott

Plate XIV. Two charming scenes of parental care in geese. (a) Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*. (b) Greylag Goose *Anser a. anser*.

J. A. Middleton

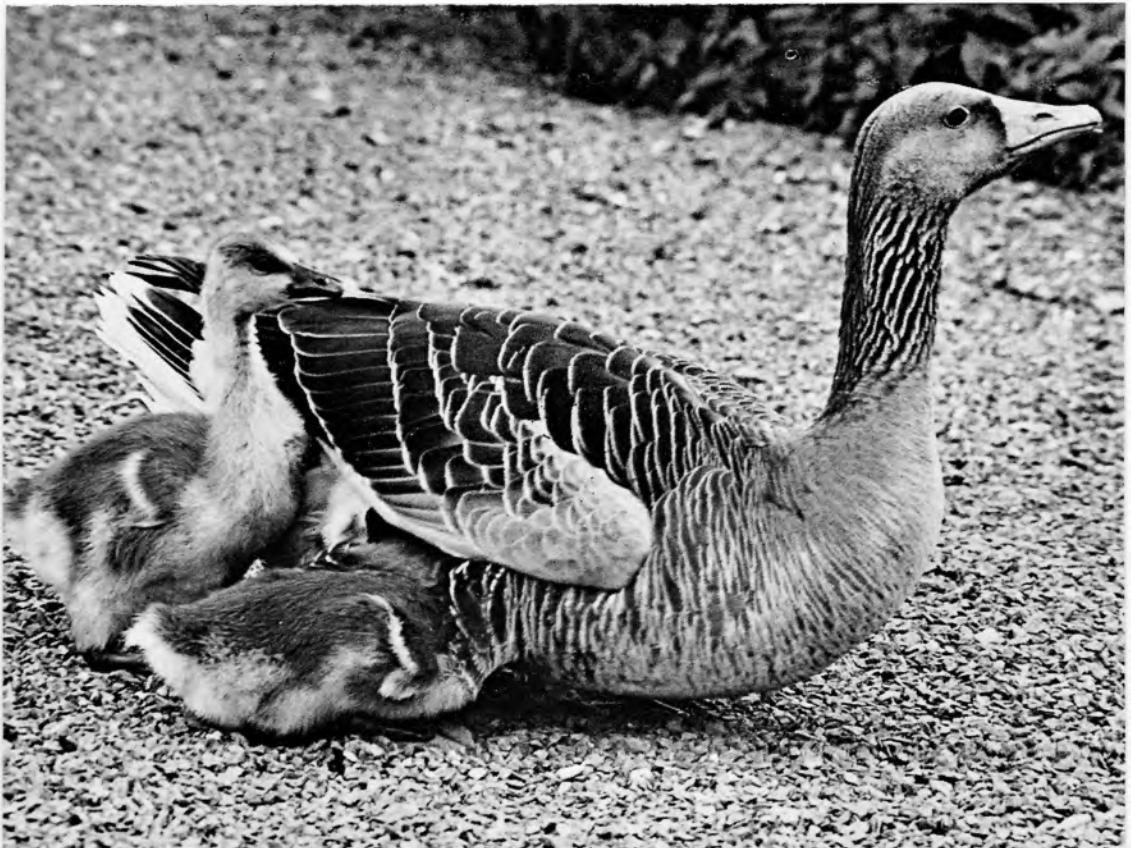


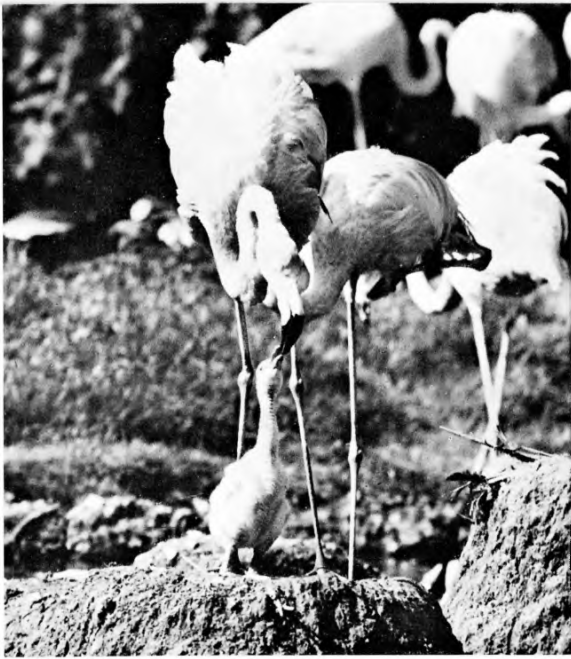


Plate XV. Two pairs of Rosy Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber ruber* bred at Slimbridge in 1968, for the first time in Britain. One egg hatched and the chick was successfully reared. (a) The incubating females. The left-hand bird is adding more mud to the nest. The raised plumes indicate slight conflict between the birds. (b) The chick, a few days old. (See p. 163.)

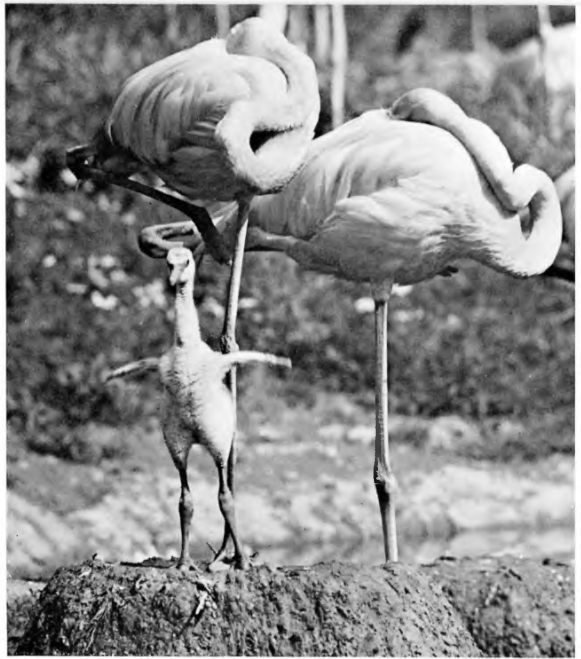
J. A. Middleton

Philippa Scott





J. A. Middleton



Philippa Scott

Plate XVI. (a) The Rosy Flamingo chick at about three weeks old being fed from the parent's bill.
 (b) 'I must exercise my wings'.