

FIRST RECORD OF THE GREATER FLAMINGO FOR NORTHEASTERN FLORIDA

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The status of the Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) in Florida has changed considerably over the past 100+ years. As recently as 1902, it was a regular and at times abundant non-breeding resident of the southern Gulf coast and Florida Bay, presumably from the colony at Andros Island, Bahamas (Howell 1932, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). But the Andros colony disappeared by 1904 as result of human disturbance, leaving Great Inagua Island and nearby keys as the sole source of breeding flamingos in the Bahamas (McNair and Gore 1998, Raffaele et al. 1998, Hallett 2006). With the loss of the Andros colony, the frequency of flamingo occurrence in Florida declined to almost zero. During the 1930s, a flock of captive Greater Flamingos was established at Hialeah Racetrack, Miami-Dade County. By the 1950s, small numbers of Greater Flamingos could be found virtually year-round in the vicinity of Snake Bight, Everglades National Park, Monroe County (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). The provenance of the Snake Bight flock, as well as flamingos observed periodically elsewhere in Florida, was for years considered conjectural. Stevenson and Anderson (1994: 92) summed up the situation by stating that, "Probably the great majority are escapes, but occasional emigrants from the Bahamas or Cuba would not be surprising." Hialeah Racetrack closed in 2001 but its flock of as many as 440 flamingos (L. Manfredi, pers. comm.) remains, and juveniles that are produced are neither pinioned nor color-banded (B. Showler in litt.).

The provenance of at least one Greater Flamingo in Florida was proven when an individual color-banded as a nestling at Ría Lagartos Biosphere Reserve, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico in 2000 was photographed at Snake Bight on 24 October 2002 (Pranty 2003). McNair and Gore (1998:43) suggested that tropical storms that passed over Cuba or the Yucatán Peninsula prior to making landfall along the northern Gulf of Mexico were "almost certainly" responsible for four of the eight reports of flamingos (three of these certain Greater Flamingos) from along the Florida Panhandle coast. The Panhandle reports occurred during two periods: early June-early July and late September-late October, which fall within the 1 June-1 December hurricane season. Here,

we report on a presumed vagrant Greater Flamingo that was observed at Matanzas Inlet, St. Johns County, Florida during September 2004, in the midst of an active hurricane season.

OBSERVATIONS

On 18 September 2004, Stephen and Alicia Steinmetz (pers. comm.) observed a juvenile flamingo at the southeastern side of Matanzas Inlet. GDB photographed the bird on 21 September (Fig. 1), and it was seen last on 23 September, when BP and James Tucker videotaped it (Pranty 2005). On the basis of its large size, pale pinkish-gray body with dusky head and upper neck, dull bluish-gray lores, black-tipped bill, black primaries and secondaries, pale wing coverts with bold black streaking, long tarsi, and dull pink legs and feet (Fig. 1), the Matanzas Inlet flamingo is clearly a hatch-year Greater Flamingo. It often roosted with a large flock of larids along the beach, and occasionally flew short distances (<150 m) in response to disturbance by the few beach-goers present. The flamingo was not banded and showed no damage to, or active molt of, its flight feathers.

DISCUSSION

According to the International Species Inventory System website (ISIS 2004), there were at least 447 Greater Flamingos (comprising both Old World and New World subspecies) in captivity at 11 animal exhibits in Florida during the latter half of 2004 (this figure excludes the flamingos at the former Hialeah Racetrack). We contacted the curators of the three exhibits closest to Matanzas Inlet—Marineland, the Jacksonville Zoological Gardens, and the Brevard Zoo—and were informed that none of their flamingos were missing. These curators also confirmed that all captive flamingos should be pinioned and color-banded (A. Rost in litt., M. Smurl in litt.).

The 2004 Atlantic Basin hurricane season was an active one, with 15 tropical storms and nine hurricanes, including six major hurricanes. The 2004 season was one of the costliest on record, with the storms causing a total of \$42 billion in the United States alone (NCDC 2004). Three hurricanes and one tropical storm during 2004 struck Florida prior to 18 September, and any of these could have transported the Greater Flamingo to Matanzas Inlet. The history of each of these storms is briefly summarized below.

Tropical Storm *Bonnie* formed north of the Yucatán Peninsula on 9 August and struck Florida's Panhandle coast on 12 August with maximum sustained winds of 43 knots. Hurricane *Charley* began as a tropical depression off Trinidad and Tobago on 9 August. It slammed into Fort Myers as a Category 4 hurricane on 13 August and exited the state near



Figure 1. Juvenile Greater Flamingo at Matanzas Inlet, St. Johns County, Florida 21 September 2004. Because this flamingo was unbanded and lacked damage to its flight feathers, we suggest that it was a natural vagrant, probably from Cuba, that was brought to the area by one of the hurricanes that struck Florida during August or September 2004. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that this flamingo came from the flock resident at the former Hialeah Racetrack in Miami-Dade County, 450 km distant. Photograph by Gian Basili.

Daytona Beach later the same day, after causing more than \$10 billion in damages. Hurricane *Frances* developed as a tropical depression in the eastern Atlantic on 24 August and struck the Bahamas as a Category 4 hurricane on 2-3 September. Hurricane *Frances* then struck Florida as a Category 2 storm in the vicinity of Port St. Lucie on 5 September, headed

northwest across the peninsula, and exited the state around Tampa. *Frances* reentered Florida as a tropical storm at St. Marks on 6 September. Hurricane *Ivan* formed in the eastern Atlantic on 2 September and entered the Caribbean Sea as a Category 4 hurricane on 7 September. *Ivan* made landfall just west of Florida at Gulf Shores, Alabama as a Category 3 hurricane on 16 September (NCDC 2004).

Although flamingos are widely kept in captivity, McNair and Gore (1998) believed that at least some of the Greater Flamingo records from the Florida Panhandle coast represented natural vagrants from the colony at Ría Lagartos, Mexico, about 1000 km to the south or south-southwest. They considered as a natural vagrant to Florida any Greater Flamingo found within 500 km of the track of a tropical storm, and within 20 days of the storm's landfall (McNair and Gore 1998). The Greater Flamingo photographed at Matanzas Inlet in mid-September 2004 meets these distance and temporal criteria for Hurricane *Frances*, and the distance criterion for Hurricane *Charley*, and would be considered by McNair and Gore (1998) to be a storm-driven vagrant.

We had presumed that the Matanzas Inlet flamingo was likely a vagrant from the colony at Great Inagua Island, Bahamas. However, we learned that the colony at Great Inagua did not reproduce during 2001-2005 because of low water levels (T. White in litt.). If the Matanzas Inlet Greater Flamingo was a natural vagrant, then it must have originated from the colonies in northern Cuba, which were also affected by Hurricane *Frances*, although not as severely as were the Bahamas (NCDC 2004). In addition to the timing of the flamingo's appearance in the midst of a very active tropical storm season, we considered the flamingo's age, its lack of color bands, its undamaged flight feathers, and the fact that the three facilities with captive flamingos closest to Matanzas Inlet had not lost any of their birds. It may be relevant to note that two Greater Flamingos were found at Boca Chica Key, Monroe County on 1 October 2004 (Pranty 2005), two weeks after the appearance of the Matanzas Inlet flamingo; these too may have been storm-driven vagrants.

We still think it likely that the Matanzas Inlet Greater Flamingo was a natural vagrant, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the flamingo could have been a storm-displaced individual from the flock at the former Hialeah Racetrack, about 300 km closer to Matanzas Inlet than the northern coast of Cuba. Little is known about the movements of flamingos from the Hialeah flock, but the several flamingo sightings each year in Miami-Dade County (e.g., the Miami Bird Board web site; see Literature Cited) suggest that at least some of these birds move around periodically—at least for relatively short (30-40 km) distances. Indeed, the presence of this breeding flock creates the possibility that Hialeah Racetrack may be the source of any flamingo observed in Florida, whether or not its timing is related to storm activity.

Regardless of its provenance, the Matanzas Inlet flamingo represents the first verifiable record of a Greater Flamingo from the northern Atlantic coast of Florida. The only previous report from the region was one flamingo at Mayport, Jacksonville, Duval County during 23 May-22 June 1964 (Cunningham 1964, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). McNair and Gore (1998) point out that vagrant flamingos are much more likely to appear along the Gulf of Mexico rather than along the Atlantic coast, due to the tracks of most tropical storms. Since the 1930s, only seven tropical storms that struck the Atlantic coast of the southern United States passed near or over Great Inagua Island, whereas at least 35 storms that struck the United States passed near or over the Yucatan Peninsula (McNair and Gore 1998).

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