

## What Am I? – Celebrating a Mystery Thing

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Print a “What Am I?” [sign](#). Add a clue in the text box, print, and post on your bulletin board. Post a different clue every day or so and see who can identify the mystery item. Then plan a “What Am I?” discussion and other related activities.

**Do you know what I am?** Here are some clues:

1. I can expect to live up to 50 years.
2. People admire me for my grace and endurance.
3. Early in my life span, I lack color.
4. My origins can be traced to South America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.
5. Interestingly, I am associated with gardening, but in reality, I have nothing to do with it.
6. Swimming is one of my favorite pastimes.
7. My appearance often makes people smile.
8. Over the past 50-plus years, my popularity has waxed and waned.
9. I believe in monogamy.
10. People assume I am native to Miami.
11. I frequently travel in large groups.
11. When I am hungry, I tend to dig for my food.
12. I have a pretty trim frame and rarely gain excess weight.
13. Balance is essential to my life.
14. Due to what I eat, I tend to blush.
15. Being very sociable, I usually flock with others of my species.
16. Many people have visited a place in Las Vegas that is named after me.
17. I am often found standing in shallow water or on front lawns.
18. Pink is my favorite color.
19. I can stand for hours on one leg.

Can you guess what I am? I'm tickled pink if you guessed I am a flamingo!



Print a copy of the [pictures](#) to pass around as you share and discuss the information with your group.

## Introduction

People have long been fascinated by flamingos for their colorful feathers, long and lanky frames, and unique ability to balance on one foot. From cave drawings dating back to 5000 BC to the opening sequence of the 1980s hit TV series *Miami Vice*, flamingos turn up in the most interesting places, including the Flamingo Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas strip, in Lewis Carroll's novel *Through the Looking Glass*, and in Disney's animated classic *Fantasia 2000*. They can even be found in many folks' front yard.

## The Flaming Bird

The flamingo has distinct physical characteristics that set it apart from other large birds. While it may look awkward when standing on its sticklike legs, a flamingo in flight is graceful and powerful. The name *flamingo* is derived from the Latin word *flamma*, meaning "flame." The reddish hue of the flamingo's feathers comes from the beta-carotene found in the algae, mollusks, and crustaceans it eats. Depending on the carotenoid levels found in its food, a flamingo's coat can vary from pale pink to a deep salmon color. In captivity, the bird's diet is supplemented with carotenoids to maintain its colorful plumage. The black feathers found under the wings are known as flight feathers, as they can only be seen when the birds are in flight.

With an incredibly long lifespan, flamingos can survive some 30 years in the wild and up to 50 years in a zoo. There are six species of flamingo in the world, and their habitats vary greatly in terms of climate and geography due to the bird's adaptability. American flamingos live in the West Indies, in the Yucatán peninsula, in the northern region of South America, and along the Galapagos Islands. South America is home to the Chilean, Andean, and James' flamingos. Greater flamingos can be found in the Middle East and India, while Africa is home to the greater and lesser flamingos.

The adult flamingo's trim body size—averaging four feet tall and six pounds—and wide wingspan of 60 inches enable it to fly long distances without taking any breaks. In fact, flamingos can migrate an incredible distance of several hundred miles in a single night. Strong and sturdy flyers,

flamingos can reach a top speed of 35 miles per hour. Since flamingos are waterfowl and live in or around saltwater lakes and lagoons, they are pretty good swimmers as well. In fact, their webbed feet aid them in swimming and feeding. After stirring the water with its feet, a flamingo will submerge its head in the water, sucking up the mud and water into its inverted bill, in an effort to extract the plankton, small fish, and fly larva for a tasty meal.

## Fun Flamingo Facts

- Flamingos are very social birds and tend to flock in large numbers. A gathering of flamingos is known as a flamboyance. In East Africa, more than one million flamingos have been known to gather, forming the largest known flamboyance in the world.
- While flamingos have excellent hearing, they possess little or no sense of smell or taste.
- Flamingos are monogamous and mate for life. During the nesting season, only one egg is laid to each couple regardless of whether it is lost or broken.
- The nest-building responsibilities are shared by male and female flamingos. They pile up mud to create a nest, which can be up to 20 inches in diameter.
- Feeding responsibilities are also shared between male and female flamingos, who secrete a milky fluid from their upper digestive tract into the mouths of their offspring.
- Flamingos are born with gray or white feathers that persist for up to three years until the color changes to a pink, red, or orange hue similar to their parents.
- The sounds flamingos make range from honking to grunting to growling, and they play an important role in keeping the family together. Nonverbal communication is also used.
- While it is not entirely clear why flamingos stand on one foot, there are theories that the position allows them to conserve energy and maintain a constant body temperature. Others maintain that it is a comfortable resting position.
- The flamingo's long neck is made up of 19 bones, and its tongue is soft and fleshy, unlike other birds.
- With legs that are longer than its entire body, the flamingo moves awkwardly. Sitting down requires the bird to bend its legs backward.
- While a flamingo's night vision is not as good as that of other nocturnal creatures, the bird can recognize and distinguish between various colors. This helps it fly in formation within a large flock.

## Flamingos as Lawn Art

In 1957, Massachusetts' plastic manufacturer Union Products hired a young sculptor fresh from art school to make three-dimensional lawn ornaments. Don Featherstone's second assignment was to sculpt a pink flamingo, but since there were no live birds to serve as a model, he resorted to using photographs from a *National Geographic* magazine as a guide. After a couple of weeks, Featherstone completed the two mold halves that would be fused together to create the most iconic of tropical ornaments, the pink flamingo (a.k.a., *phoenicopterus ruber plasticus*). To date, an estimated 20 million have been sold.

Upon their debut on store shelves, the pink birds were an instant success among the working class. During the postwar period when home construction was lacking in variety, this simple ornamentation

allowed homeowners to add something unique to their home's exterior. For only \$2.76, a consumer could purchase two birds—one holding its head erect and the other bent over in search of food—and plant them in the front yard. The charm of the pink flamingo soon wore off, though. During the 1960s, when there was a backlash against the plastics industry and anything artificial in gardening, people labeled pink flamingos as tacky. Even Sears dropped them from its catalog.



By the early 1970s, the pendulum of taste had swung back in favor of pink flamingos. Since they were so outrageous and kitschy, they became quite cool. For some, the plastic bird became a symbol of rebellion. In 1979, University of Wisconsin-Madison students planted over 1,000 pink flamingos on the lawn of Bascom Hill to celebrate a political victory. Thus, the flocking trend was born.

Today, the garden art lives on. You can find the salmon-colored bird's name and likeness used on bars and restaurants as well as on all manner of sports equipment and accessories. Although a pair can be purchased online for less than \$20, some homeowners' associations across the United States have banned pink flamingos from front yards to maintain a certain curb appeal and prevent diminishing home values. Somehow it feels we have come full circle in the nearly 60 years since the birth of the first plastic pink flamingo.

### Flamingo Trivia

- Leominster, Massachusetts, was known as the “plastics capital of the world” because of the number of plastic manufacturers doing business in the area, including toy producer Viscoloid Company, sunglasses pioneer Foster Grant, and plastic storage innovator Tupperware. The invention of celluloid, one of the first plastics, in 1868 advanced the comb manufacturing operations in Leominster and earned it the title of “Comb City.”
- According to news reports, Don and Nancy Featherstone had worn matching outfits, handmade by Nancy and often featuring pink flamingos, over the course of 35 years until Don's death in 2015.
- The pink flamingos are still manufactured in the United States by Cado Company of Fitchburg, Massachusetts. In 2010, the plastics company acquired Union Products and the rights to the design of the legendary pink flamingo. Cado now offers a [Zombie Flamingo](#) version.
- In the late 1980s, Don Featherstone's signature was added to the original plastic mold to distinguish the authentic pink flamingos from the imitators, of which there were many.
- Two 1980 pink flamingos are on display in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History as part of the museum's regular collection. Made from the original molds designed by Featherstone, the pair measures about 14” x 8.5” without the metal legs or stakes.
- Pink flamingos are an essential ingredient in the “flocking” prank in which someone's yard is filled with an excessive number of plastic birds to mark a birthday, anniversary, or other special occasion. Fundraisers also employ this gimmick by obliging victims to make a donation to the organization in order to have the flamingos removed from their lawn.
- According to flamingo lore, Featherstone kept 57 of the pink birds on the front lawn of his Fitchburg, Massachusetts, home to commemorate the year in which his most famous design was hatched.
- The plastic pink flamingo was designated by the city council in 2009 as the official bird of Madison, Wisconsin, to mark the anniversary of the 1979 student prank. The movement's leaders donated one of the birds from their successful flocking to the Wisconsin State Historical Society, where it is on display.





