

## ESCAPE | ECO-LOGIC

Field Notes by Janine Stephen

# FIRST FLIGHT OF THE FLAMINGOS

The great bird rescue of 2019 at Kamfers Dam is leading to new discoveries



In January over 2000 balls of fluff wobbled their way into the news: lesser flamingo chicks, scooped from nests left exposed by the receding waters of Kamfers Dam in Kimberley. Drought and issues with sewage treatment and lack of waste-water effluent were to blame. Although the jury's out on whether the rescues were essential, suddenly there were 2000 mouths to feed.

That the babies even exist is remarkable. Kamfers is one of only four African breeding sites for the pink wonders – and the newest. A plan to get the birds to nest here was conceived in 2006 by Mark Anderson, now CEO of BirdLife SA. An S-shaped island – safe from predators and disturbance – was bulldozed into being with the help of local mining company Ekapa. It was covered in sticky clay for nest building, and fake turrets were erected to plant the idea in the birds' brains. The results were

spectacular: more than 24 000 chicks were raised from 2008 to 2011. The southern African population was estimated at 65 000.

Since then, the Kamfers flamingos have been besieged by avian pox, floods and too much raw sewage, although a R100-million infrastructure repair job later helped. Until January this year... Volunteers took on the arduous task of feeding the rescued chicks every four hours. Kimberley vet Donovan Smith was one of many who fed the infants a mixture that included Nestum baby food and Beefee vitamin powder, drop by drop from a syringe. Donovan grew fond of No. 18 (a tough bully called Steven) and another dehydrated scrap wounded by crows. 'We thought it couldn't survive, but somehow it kept going, so we gave it the number 0 and called him Zorro. That changed to Xena when we realised she was female.'

Dr Doug Harebottle, head of biological

## HOW TO HELP

### THINK PINK

- Seen a flamingo with a yellow ring? Send the details to [doug.harebottle@spu.ac.za](mailto:doug.harebottle@spu.ac.za) to help keep track of the youngsters.
- BirdLife is raising funds for new flappers and other projects; see [birdlife.org.za](http://birdlife.org.za).
- Help rescuers care for the last stragglers by donating to local NPO SaamStaan Kimberley, referencing 'flamingo'. For details, message Linja Allen on 072-011-2335.

**LEFT** The flamingo island in Kamfers Dam measures 250m x 25m. Nesting season is from October to February.

and agricultural sciences at Sol Plaatje University, says that about one in three of the rescued chicks made it to release: poignant videos show groups of survivor flapping their way to the shoreline. But that's not the end of the story. The juveniles have been ringed, and 20 are fitted with natty GPS trackers weighing just 18g. Solar powered, these collect info hourly and send it back to scientists every eight hours. Vital information on behaviour and dispersion is trickling in: ringed birds have made it to Namibia, Mpumalanga and Port Elizabeth. 'We're learning about routes never recorded before,' says Harebottle.

There have been inevitable losses – and new dangers discovered, like collisions with nearby Transnet railway lines. Moves are afoot to fund the replacement of the dilapidated old bird-scaring devices, or 'flappers', on the lines and these will have LED lights to help birds avoid the lines when flying at night. Sol Plaatje Municipality says it's committed to supplying effluent to Kamfers, and a new pipeline completed in July should help. Sometimes, individuals really do make a difference.

[cfoo.co.za/flamingo/tracking/html](http://cfoo.co.za/flamingo/tracking/html)