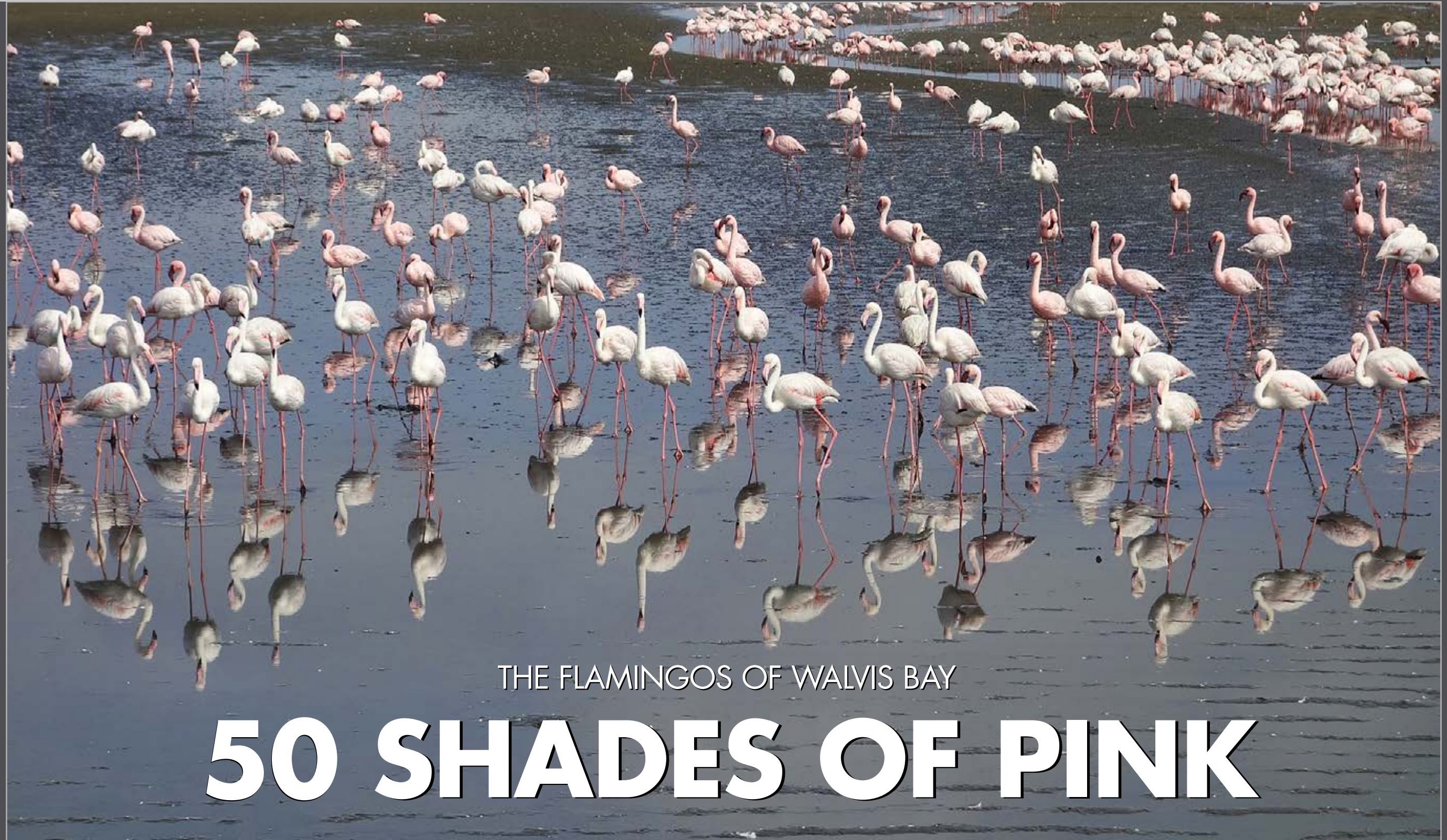


# WorldWideWonders



THE FLAMINGOS OF WALVIS BAY

## 50 SHADES OF PINK

A graceful ballet suspended between the Atlantic ocean and the African sky  
unfolds along Namibia's gate to the Skeleton Coast





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The Greater flamingo population size is very large, and hence is not considered vulnerable. Lesser flamingo, on the other hand, despite being the most numerous species of flamingo is classified as near-threatened due to its declining population and the low number of breeding sites, some of which are threatened by human activities.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

This is the largest species of flamingo, averaging 110–150 cm (43–59 in) tall and weighing 2–4 kg (4.4–8.8 lb).

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI  
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

Whenever driving across Namibia and travelling along its legendary Skeleton Coast on the route from Windhoek to Etosha, one should never forget to put aside a couple of days for a spectacular photo date with the flamingos of Walvis Bay. Walvis Bay (Afrikaans Walvisbaai, German Walfischbucht or Walfischbai, all meaning "Whale Bay") is both a coastal town and the name of the bay on which it lies. The town has 85,000 inhabitants and has a total area of 29 square kilometres of land. The bay itself is a safe haven for sea vessels because of its natural deepwater harbour, protected by the Pelican Point sand spit, being the only natural harbour of any size along the country's coast. Being rich in plankton and marine life, these waters in the past also drew large numbers of Southern right whales, attracting whalers and fishing vessels. The town is situated just north of the Tropic of Capricorn in the Kuiseb River delta, lying at the end of the TransNamib Railway to Windhoek, and on the B2 road. Its seafront promenade - on good days, and usually in the morning - is the perfect verandah to admire from a vantage point (and photograph) the huge flocks of Greater and Lesser flamingos (plus several shorebirds, waders and gulls) feeding in the shallow waters and mudflats by the bund. It's easy, it's comfortable - and on good days it's absolutely stunning. Mixed flocks - with the bright white and delicate pink, stately Greater flamingos and bright pink,

deep red, daintier Lesser flamingos - move in great waves, strutting in unison, squawking in a joyful cacophony of sounds and oscillating in great, spreading, undulating sheets of color against the mirror-like shallow pools reflecting the bright blue sky, offering wonderful photographic opportunities to those with an eye for such things, and simple plain bewilderment to all bird and nature lovers. As it should always be with nature and true wildlife photography, full satisfaction depends on the vagaries of the weather and above all on the behavior of the birds, which are free to move closer to the bund or not, and even to show up at all or not (they usually do). There's no way to try getting closer to them (it's muddy and they just move away, keeping a distance): the only real alternative a photographer has is the choice of lenses (a 600mm or a good zoom are the best) and the option of standing up, sitting down or even - for the most motivated - lying down on the wet concrete. But even that wouldn't make a big difference, as the promenade is slightly elevated anyway. This spoils many shots (it's almost impossible getting the flamingos against the sky) and makes magic with others (as shooting from above shows plenty of beautiful reflections in the water). In any case, the spectacle is so beautiful that just being there is a privilege, so there's also the possibility of simply relaxing, breath the cool Atlantic sea breeze and soak the view in. Just take a look at the following pages, and decide what you would like best. ●





**Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The Lesser flamingo is the smallest species of flamingo, though it is a tall and large bird by normal standards. The species can weigh from 1.2 to 2.7 kg (2.6 to 6.0 lb). The standing height is around 80 to 90 cm (31 to 35 in).





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The Greater flamingo is seen from West Africa eastward throughout the Mediterranean to South West and South Asia, and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The Lesser flamingo occurs in sub-Saharan Africa with another population in India. Birds are occasionally reported from further north, but these are usually considered vagrants.





**Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The clearest difference between this species and the Greater flamingo, the only other Old World species of flamingo, is the much darker color of the bill.



**Greater flamingo and Lesser flamingo**

These two species can be observed coexisting peacefully side by side on the mudflats of Walvis Bay.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

The most widespread species of the flamingo family. The Palearctic population (including West Africa, Iran and Kazakhstan) is estimated to number between 205,000 and 320,000, the South West and South Asian populations combined at 240,000, and the sub-Saharan African populations between 100,000 and 120,000.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

Most of the plumage is pinkish-white, but the wing coverts are red and the primary and secondary flight feathers are black.



**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

The bill is pink with a restricted black tip, and the legs are entirely pink.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

This species resides in mudflats and shallow coastal lagoons with salt water. Using its feet, the bird stirs up the mud, then sucks water through its bill and filters out small shrimp, seeds, blue-green algae, microscopic organisms and mollusks.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

Sub-adult flamingos are whitish-grey and only attain the pink coloration several years into their adult life. The coloration comes from the carotenoid pigments in the organisms that live in their feeding grounds.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* has been split into *P. roseus* and *P. ruber*. The Lesser flamingo was classified in genus *Phoenicopterus* until 2014, but is now classified as the only species in the genus *Phoeniconaias*, the only monotypic genus of flamingo.





**Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

The Lesser flamingo may be the most numerous species of flamingo, with a population that probably numbers up to two million individual birds.



**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

Average lifespan of this species (in captivity) is over 60 years, but probably much shorter in the wild.





**Greater flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Flamingos are highly specialized filter-feeders, which feed with their head down. The upper jaw is movable and not rigidly fixed to the bird's skull.





**Lesser flamingo and Greater flamingo**  
The differences between the two species are clearly visible in this side-by-side image.



**Greater flamingo and Lesser flamingo**  
Both species can be observed on the mudflats of Walvis Bay.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

This species is found in parts of Africa, southern Asia (Bangladesh and coastal regions of Pakistan and India), the Middle East (Cyprus, Israel) and southern Europe (including Spain, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, Italy and the Camargue region of France).





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***  
 A panoramic shot of the Walvis Bay mudflats with a small portion of their resident flamingos.



**Hartlaub's Gull *Larus hartlaubii***  
 A resident endemic to the Atlantic Ocean coastline of South Africa and Namibia.



**Curlew sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea***  
 A small wader that breeds on the tundra of Arctic Siberia.





**Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***

This species feeds primarily on *Spirulina*, algae which grow only in very alkaline lakes. Presence of flamingo herds near water bodies is indication of sodic alkaline water which is not suitable for irrigation use. Although blue-green in colour, the algae contain the photosynthetic pigments that give the birds their pink colour.





**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

Also known as the Black-bellied plover in North America, this is long-distance migrant, with a nearly worldwide coastal distribution when not breeding.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor***  
Shallow pools of still seawater create wonderful reflections when the flamingos cross them or pause to feed.





**Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola***

A medium-sized plover species which breeds in Arctic regions.



**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus***

Like all flamingos, this species lays a single chalky-white egg on a mud mound.





**Greater flamingo *Phoenicopeterus roseus***

Largest males have been recorded at up to 187 cm (74 in) tall and 4.5 kg (9.9 lb)



**Damara Tern *Sternula balaenarum***

A species whose natural habitats are shallow seas, sandy shores, and coastal saline lagoons. It is threatened by habitat loss.