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CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS

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POWERS SQUARED
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FLAMINGO

When considering the flamingo, it's difficult to decide whether nature was cracking a joke or showing off. How a bird that apparently shares its ancestry with the diminutive grebe could be persuaded to get up on stilts, turn its beak upside down and equip itself for a gay parade is one of life's enduring puzzles. Flamingos are ungainly and yet elegant, garish and yet gorgeous; they can raise a laugh or reignite the smoldering souls of poets. It comes as no surprise that Lewis Carroll chose to employ them as croquet mallets in the illogically logical world of *Alice in Wonderland*.

There are six extant species of flamingo, and they are all, by and large, cut from the same colorful cloth and follow the same basic design. A seventh type, Featherstone's flamingo, is differentiated by the fact that it's made of plastic. It can be found on manicured lawns in suburban America, usually singly or in pairs but sometimes in flocks. Originally created in 1957 by Don Featherstone for the garden ornament company Union Products, the current population of indestructible pink plastic flamingos is estimated to run into millions. While reviled by many as the pinnacle of kitsch, the Smithsonian recognizes the enigma as an icon of American folk art, and in 2009 it was adopted, believe it or not, as the official plastic bird of the City of Madison in the State of Wisconsin.

Real flamingos are not endemic to the USA, least of all Wisconsin, and traditionally favor tropical and subtropical climes. The closest naturally occurring populations of American flamingos, *Phoenicopterus ruber*, are found on islands in the Caribbean. Three other New World species live further south, notably in Chile. The exotic and appealing vision of paradise that the birds conjure up in the jaded minds of commuting America probably explains the enduring appeal of Mr. Featherstone's immobile replicas.

The world's most widespread living and breathing species is the greater flamingo, *Phoenicopterus roseus*, which occurs in isolated communities in many parts of Africa, southern Europe and southeast Asia. The most numerous is the lesser flamingo, *Phoeniconaias minor*, particularly famous

for gathering in vast flocks, numbering in the tens of thousands, on the inhospitable soda lakes of East Africa's Great Rift Valley. Where they overlap, including in South Africa, the two species are sometimes found together, sharing the same habitat.

Both species are filter feeders but largely target different prey and so have no reason to get testy with each other. The lesser flamingo feeds mainly on plankton and algae, while the bigger bird tucks into small aquatic invertebrates, insects and tiny fish, but their method of feeding is essentially the same. They dip their bristle-lined topsy-turvy bill into the water and sweep it to and fro like a sieve. Their tongue acts like a piston to pump out the water, and the bird then swallows the mush. Baby flamingos are born with light gray plumage and the pinks and reds of adult birds are derived mainly from the carotene and bacteria in their diet. Generally speaking, the pinker the flamingo the better it's fed and the happier it probably feels.

All flamingo species are gregarious, which is just as well, because nature has been remarkably stingy in providing habitats to meet their preferred feeding, breeding and security requirements. The ideal combination sometimes leads them to places that most other birds, animals and even most fish would regard as hell on earth. Soda lakes, like those in the Great Rift Valley, typically have few, if any, large fish to compete for the organisms the birds feed on. The catch is that such lakes often have no

outlet, and if the inflow of fresh water drops, the salts remorselessly build up. At the best of times the birds have to visit nearby streams regularly to clean their plumage. In bad years the saline balance can get so out of kilter that it dooms the chicks. Salt gradually builds up on their legs, eventually forming heavy manacles that make walking difficult and the prospect of flying impossible.

Aside from such gloomy natural traps, things usually work out, and the birds are capable of staging some of the biggest and most flamboyant parties on the planet. Their en masse synchronized mating rituals can be hilarious to our eyes, though they'd probably be mortified to hear it. But they've got the moves, baby, easily outshining a heaving mass of self-conscious teenage disco dancers.

The point of these synchronized displays is to pair off and get everyone in the mood. Once the fun's over they get down to the serious business of nest building. The result is a mini-volcano made mainly of mud. The female lays a single egg in the caldera, and the parents take turns sitting on the nest. Both parents feed the chick for several weeks with crop milk manufactured by glands in their upper digestive tract; they are among the few birds to have evolved such an intimate method.

Flamingo chicks instinctively know that they're one of a crowd rather than one of a kind, congregating into small neighborhood crèches within two weeks of hatching. Where there's a large population, these small crèches gradually coalesce into a super-group containing all the chicks in the colony. The purpose, of course, is to counter the threat from predators, but fish eagles, jackals and hyenas like to pop in now and again to point out the deficiencies.

A flamingo chick can potentially look forward to a remarkably long life, although there are no guarantees in the wild. A male greater flamingo that arrived in the Adelaide Zoo in Australia in 1933 finally died in 2014, at the ripe old age of 83. At the time, he was the oldest creature in the zoo, a martyr to arthritis. His sole companion over many years was an Andean flamingo that, at a sprightly 65, still soldiers on alone.

ELEPHANT

African and Asian elephants have only once fought against each other in a formal battle. The result was a pushover for the Asians. The encounter occurred during the Battle of Gaza in 217 BC between the forces of the Egyptian pharaoh, Ptolemy IV, and Antiochus III of the Seleucid kingdom.

To be fair, Antiochus had 102 Asian elephants in his army, whereas Ptolemy could muster only 73 reluctant Africans, rounded up on the savannas of Eritrea. They were smaller than their Asian counterparts, from a subspecies now extinct. They took one look at the trumpeting horde of Oriental pachyderms, ditched their keepers, and promptly stampeded off the battlefield. Despite this disappointing performance, Ptolemy's army still somehow managed to win the day.

While it's certainly nothing to brag about, trained elephants have been used in wars for over 3,000 years. Virtually all these combatants were from Asia, but the elephants that famously plodded over the snowy Alps with Hannibal to attack the Romans on their home turf were almost certainly African. They were probably sourced from the slopes of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, and may, once again, have been of a slightly smaller subspecies now no longer with us.

The big tuskers that roamed the forests and savannas south of the vast Sahara were inaccessible to the warmongers of the old world, so they couldn't easily be recruited to join the ongoing carnage. By the time this changed, high explosives had been invented and their services on the battlefield were no longer required.

An elephant's main preoccupation in life is eating rather than fighting. To meet the nutritional requirements of their huge bodies they need to consume about 170 kilograms (375 pounds) of vegetation every day, which can mean munching for up to 18 hours in every 24. Their digestive systems are also not wildly efficient, so a significant proportion of what goes in one end comes out the other, only partly the worse for wear. That's good news for dung beetles, of course, and all the other creatures that make a

living in the recycling business; but it does mean that any "all you can eat" restaurants would quickly flip their signs and lock the doors if they saw a boisterous party of elephants coming down the street toward them.

As you'd expect from big eaters, elephants tuck away a wide variety of plant matter, including grass, leaves, bark, twigs, seed pods and fruits. They routinely break branches or push over entire trees, some quite sizeable, to get at what they want. In the natural scheme of things their destructive feeding habits don't matter much, and can even eventually be beneficial for other plant—and even other animal—species. But when large numbers of elephants are artificially confined to an inadequate area the result can be catastrophic for the entire ecosystem, including the elephants themselves.

African elephants used to wander wherever they pleased, north to south and east to west, from the temperate shores of Table Bay to the tropical beaches of East Africa's Great Lakes and beyond. Many of their old migration trails through coastal mountain passes and thick forests were used by Thomas Bain and other road and railway engineers as they opened up the hinterlands of Africa. Ironically, among the first to make use of these routes were professional hunters, the precursors of a great slaughter that soon decimated the elephant populations, as well as vast numbers of other African creatures on the plains of the great plateaus.

Of course, professional hunters were mainly after elephant tusks, which, if it weren't a commonly accepted fact, would surely be regarded as utterly bizarre. It is the only instance in the history of life on earth in which one species has preyed on another with the express purpose of extracting two of its teeth. An alien visitor might reasonably conclude that we were a species of mad dentists.

Elephant tusks are modified incisors and very useful to the rightful owner in a variety of ways, including as levers, for digging, stripping bark from trees, as well as in defense and offense. They are purely ornamental for anyone else. With the advent of synthetic materials, ivory is no longer even used for billiard balls or piano keys, but nevertheless demand, principally from China, remains insatiable. Buyers, legal or otherwise, are prepared to pay huge sums.

Big-game hunters took a heavy toll on elephants in Africa but they had become rather ridiculous anachronisms by the middle of the 20th century. Their place was taken by men with AK-47s who needed money, mainly to buy more AK-47s. By the 1960s the large-scale wars that the African elephant had once managed to avoid had finally arrived on their home

ground, with truly devastating results for the species.

Elephants are intelligent and emotional animals, and they must surely wonder where it will all end. Those unfortunates charged with the horrible task of culling elephants in overpopulated areas know that it is more humane to kill all the animals in a given family, such is the overwhelming misery and inconsolable distress of any survivors.

Elephants endeavor to support and lift an ailing matriarch or family member, and to hover around a corpse for hours, seemingly undecided about what to do. Even the bleached bones of long-dead elephants garner intense interest; in a strange communion they gently touch the remains, particularly the tusks and the jaws, with the tip of their trunk.

For the time being the behemoths can only soldier on, making the best of the parcels of wild land presently left to them by humanity's burgeoning numbers and relentless warring. But for the largest land animal on earth, there are inevitable stresses and strains in being confined.

When they reach the age of 12 or so, young male elephants are shown the door by the family matriarch and in the normal course of events join

up with mature bulls which, like it or not, are responsible for their higher education. In recent years, young bull elephants in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi in KwaZulu-Natal lacked such role models and somewhat unfairly focused their teenage frustrations on rhinos, bowling them about like beach balls. They killed several and the mayhem only subsided with the intervention of two huge mature elephant bulls trucked in from the Kruger National Park.

It is a sad indictment of our own species that we seem incapable of finding such mountains of wisdom and placid authority to bring an end to our own bloody and perpetual squabbles.