

“Save the Flamingo”: Was It a Good Idea?

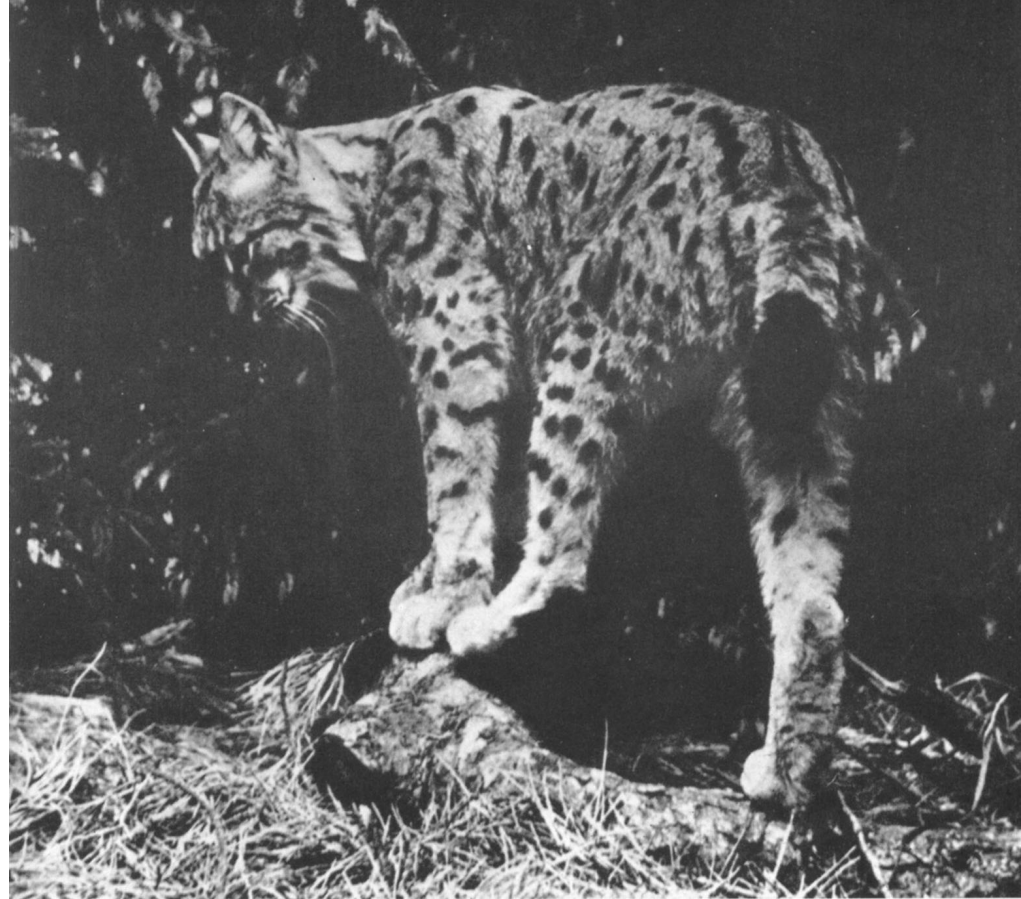
Two Views on the Value of a Rescue Operation

In 1962 over a million pairs of lesser and greater flamingos settled on Lake Magadi in Kenya to breed when their traditional breeding grounds on Lake Natron were under water. But after a successful hatching, a large number of chicks developed “anklets” of soda on their legs, which eventually made them unable to move. A “Save the Flamingo” campaign was launched with much publicity, a fund raised, and many of the anklets were successfully removed. In this article, Mr. J. M. Pearson, who lives in Nairobi, asks: Was the project really a desirable one, and what did it achieve? We asked Peter Scott, a member of the FPS Council, chairman of IUCN’s Survival Service Commission and of the British National Appeal of the World Wildlife Fund, for his comments, and these follow Mr. Pearson’s article.

WE have in East Africa a series of wholly admirable National Parks, where large numbers of animals live under what at first sight appear to be entirely natural surroundings. But often this is not the case at all. No doubt these areas have in the past always supported large numbers of animals although, in times of drought, flooding, overstocking and so on, the animals would migrate to other and temporarily more favourable localities, which they could do quite freely, unhampered by human interference. But in recent years the parks have become so hemmed in by human habitation that these periodic migrations can no longer be tolerated, and artificially favourable conditions have had to be created within the parks to ensure that the animals are not subject to hardships which might deplete their numbers so seriously they could not build up again.

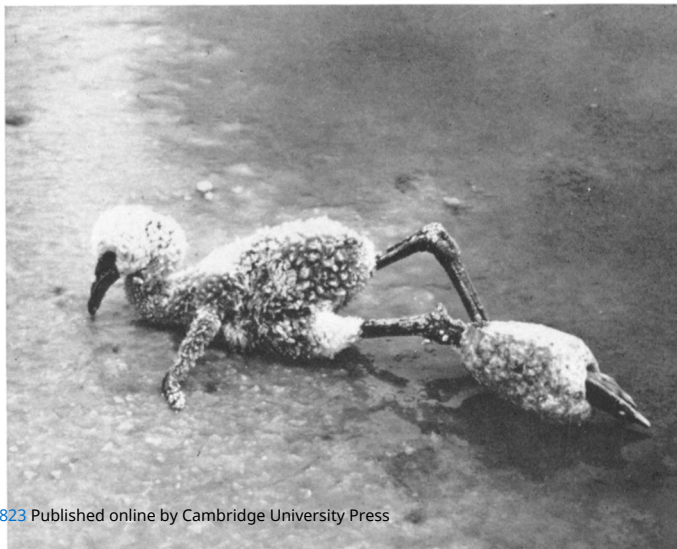
This is unfortunate because natural disasters probably played a vital role in producing progressively hardier breeds, and periodic cullings, brought about by drought and disease, selectively eliminated the potentially undesirable characteristics of the herds in a way no human agency could achieve. The flamingo is of particular interest because, unlike many of our game animals, its movements are still unconfined in any way. It is a virtually perfect example of “the blameless existence”. It competes for its food with no other form of life; transmits no known disease, devours no crops, harms no cattle and by a great stroke of good fortune is not particularly good to eat. Although a few do get shot this happens very seldom, and about the only other unnatural hazard with which they are faced is the telephone wires into which they fly at night.

In short, and as far as it is possible to tell, if any form of wild life exists in East Africa to-day unaffected and uninfluenced by human interference, it is the flamingo. The fact that these birds have become so completely adapted to life in what seems to us to be an uncompromisingly hostile

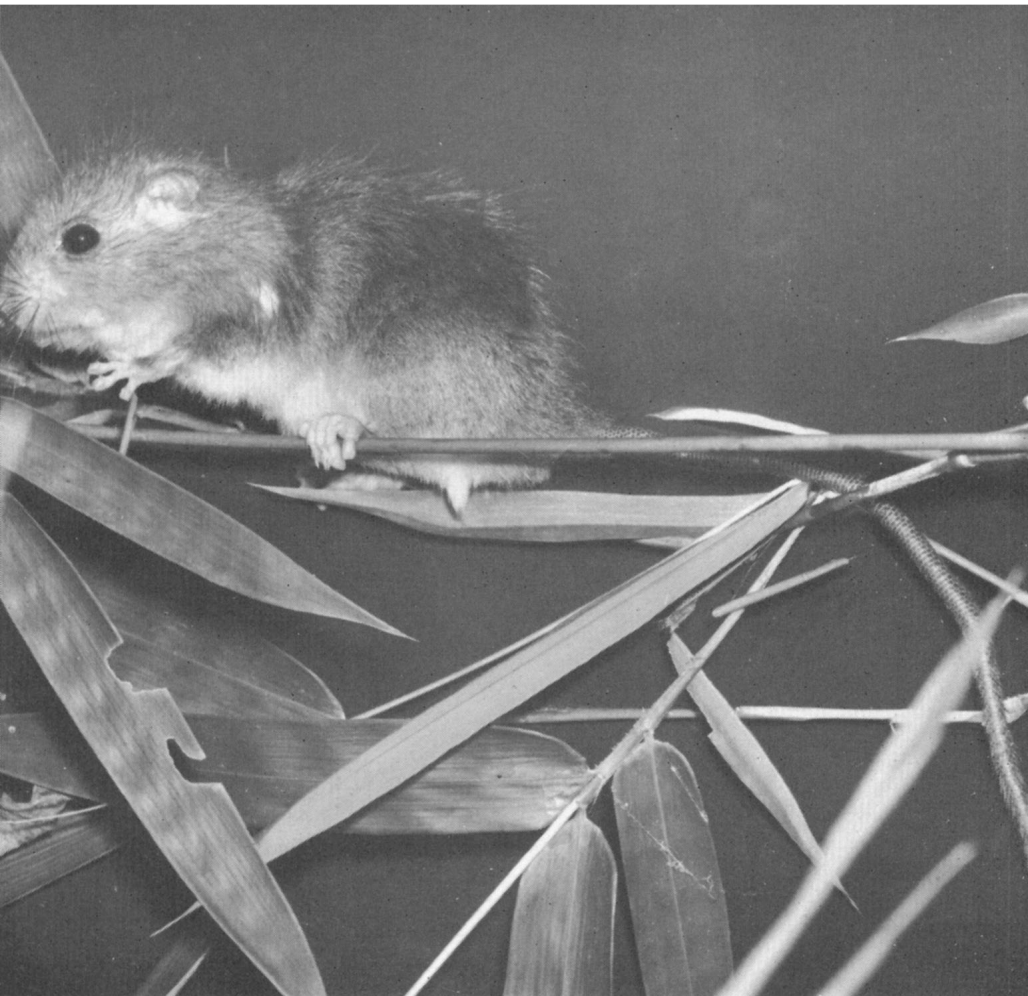


Jaroslav Holeček : Dilic

**Plate 12 : A lynx in the Carpathians, one of its last strongholds in Europe.
Reproduced from *Europe*, by Kai Curry-Lindahl, reviewed on page 53.**



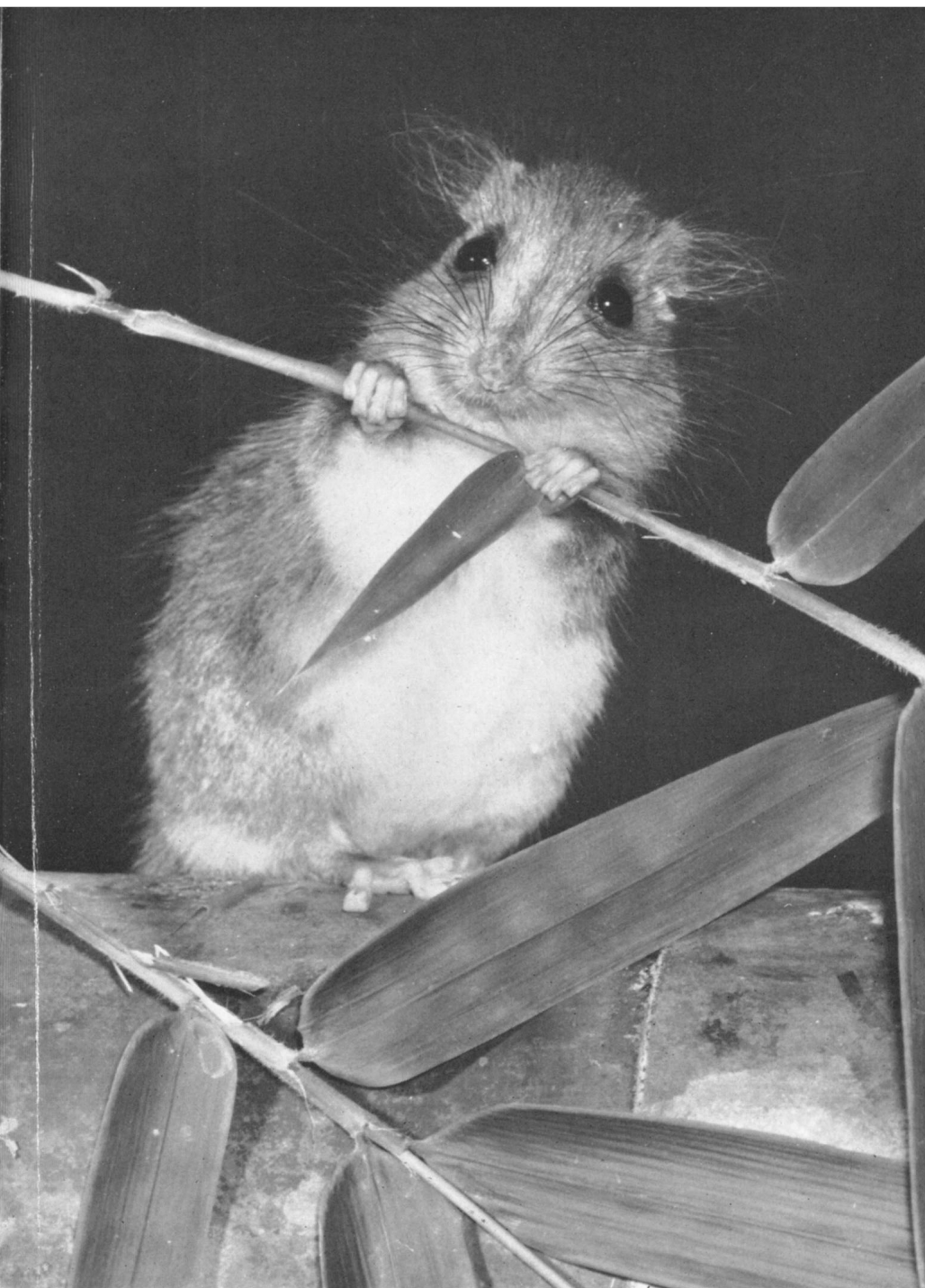
**Plate 13: A flamingo chick with a soda "ank-
let" at Lake Magadi
in Kenya in 1962.**

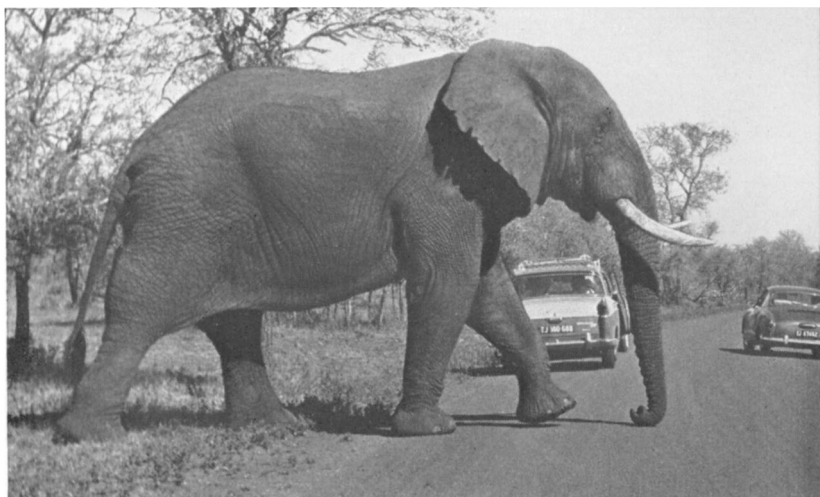


Jane Burton

THE MARMOSET RAT

Plate 14 : The Marmoset Rat *Hapalomys longicaudatus* was photographed for the first time when Lord Medway collected one in Ulu Kelantan district of Malaya in 1963. It is a rare species of south-east Asia, ranging from Burma to Malaya, but Lord Medway found they were quite common in this district where the people eat them. Writing in the *Malayan Nature Journal*, he describes it as a plump, short-nosed rat with dense soft fur, white below and greyish-brown above. It feeds on the shoots, flowers and fruit of a bamboo, *Gigantochloa scotrechinii*, and nests in the internodal cavities of the bamboo stems, using the leaves as lining.





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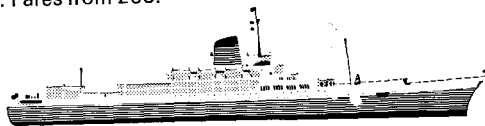
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UNION-CASTLE
THE BIG SHIP WAY TO THE SUN

environment is a good indication of the length of time that they must have occupied this particular ecological niche, and in those thousands of years they must have been subjected to all kinds of natural calamity. Yet, when in 1962 a large breeding colony of lesser flamingo established themselves for the first time in an area where they could be closely studied, in no time at all they had to be “ saved ”.

Now, it is a regrettable fact that although flamingos are such a feature of our countryside in East Africa, we know little about them. In fact, in 1962 when the vast concourse of lesser flamingos gathered on Lake Magadi this was the first time that anyone had ever had an opportunity to observe at close range the breeding behaviour of such a large colony. This was estimated to have contained about one million pairs and it is obvious that fatalities among the young produced by such an event were bound to be fairly high. The sight of large numbers of chicks dying of thirst, starvation or of the intense heat to which they are exposed out on the soda flats is certainly a most distressing one but is nevertheless, in all probability, the rule rather than the exception in any large colony of this type. However, one thing did occur which was not considered normal, and that was the formation of soda “ anklets ” around the legs of many young birds, eventually estimated to have numbered some 30,000. These greatly hampered the movements of the birds and in the most severe cases caused death. (Incidentally, the later discovery at Magadi of a “ fossilised ankle ” suggests that this was not an isolated occurrence.)

It could be argued that the flamingo would not have nested at Magadi if conditions on that lake in 1962 had not closely approximated those normally prevalent at Lake Natron, their regular breeding ground, which was unusable owing to extensive flooding, and that we might simply have been witnessing for the first time a set-back experienced by any large breeding colony under similar circumstances. After all, since flamingo breed in very specialised conditions it is surely not unreasonable to feel that they may well suffer from complaints peculiar only to those conditions. They spend their entire lives in this environment, and the necessity to produce successive generations of offspring capable of surviving anything that these surroundings may throw up at them is urgent, so that even if the occurrence was not normal, we may just have been witnessing the penalisation of a combination of genetic characteristics which had proved unfavourable under the prevailing conditions.

The spectacle at Magadi attracted large numbers of visitors from nearby Nairobi, a fund was started and volunteers set to work to free the birds from their shackles and return them to the lake. In the course of the operations the organisers claimed that in addition to the original 30,000, a further 100,000 were driven away from the vicinity of the nesting site towards another part of the lake where it was thought they would have a better chance of survival.

The flamingo’s life is based on the assumption that any offspring born into the world in possession of characteristics of an undesirable nature will not live long enough to perpetuate them in the next generation. Can an action which may well qualify as humanitarian when initiated in respect of one form of life, automatically be assumed to be humanitarian when

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applied to another utterly different species? My contention is that it cannot, and that it is most unsound to consider incidents such as the Magadi "anklet" episode in isolation. They can only be evaluated correctly in relation to the ecology of the area as a whole. In this case 130,000 birds which we are assured would otherwise have died were not allowed to do so, but were kept alive on the lake, remaining there to share in the food supply which would, under normal circumstances, have been available only to the hardiest members of the community. It may have been a coincidence that, several weeks later, the shores of the lake were littered with dead and dying birds too young to fly far, and unable to leave a lake whose food supplies could no longer support them.

The question is, was the action taken to "save" the flamingo justified or not? The trouble is that we just don't know, and this, I am sure, is the true lesson to be learned from what happened at Magadi. In an age when the need to conserve what little remains of our wild life is so urgent, how much longer can we afford "We don't know"? It is difficult to see how any conservation programme can hope to succeed unless based on scientific fact. Without this we can only achieve the desired result by chance. Some parts of the earth's evolutionary processes we understand, others we do not, and it behoves us to tread warily since, although we most certainly have it in our power to destroy other animals, so far we have shown remarkably little talent for the opposite process of resurrection.

Alone among the animals on earth we have been granted the power of reasoning with which to lift our actions from the plane of instinct to that of logic. Unless we are prepared to use that logic, instead of letting sentiment run away with us, in a few years' time photographs and museum specimens will be about all we will have left to us. Who can say that if that time ever comes, the world will not be a sadder and poorer place?

Peter Scott writes :

THE author is right that the Magadi operation was scientifically pointless—though I do not think it was on a scale that could conceivably have any long-term influence on genetics, evolution or population dynamics. It was entirely emotional and born of man's perfectly laudable inclination to "do something about it" when faced with individual suffering animals. Operation Noah at Kariba and the work of Oxfam are exact parallels. Oxfam is almost certainly alleviating present human suffering at the expense of future human welfare in extreme over-population. But for the same reason that we cannot condemn Oxfam, we cannot condemn the motivation of the Magadi flamingo operation. Men cannot be expected to stand by and watch suffering if there is an obvious immediate remedy.

His call for more research is very sound. Of course we should have more research, so that whenever possible we can avoid money and effort being expended on projects which are scientifically inept. But emotions are just as much a part of human beings as logic, responsible for far more of their actions—and they always will be. For anyone keen on wildlife conservation to say, "Stand aside and let the downy flamingo, with its anklet on, die—

it is probably booked by evolution for non-survival and we must not interfere,” would be even more damaging to the image of the wildlife conservationist than for him to tackle an occasional problem which is not ecologically sound.

We are all agreed that the unnatural “management” of populations which so often goes on in Africa’s National Parks is undesirable. It would no doubt be much better if the ungulates, for example, were free to wander all over Africa, but of course they aren’t, and so we have to accept the managed and probably, in future, largely enclosed animal communities as second best. They are a good deal better than nothing. However, he makes a good point that until man knows a great deal more than he does now, he should not be so eager to play God, not so precipitate in his control measures, nor so certain that with his half-knowledge he can produce “all the answers”.

Postscript : One useful result of the flamingo rescue operations, reported in *Africana* for December, 1964, is the recovery of a flamingo, ringed at Magadi, at Sodere, on the Awash River in Ethiopia. During the rescue operations the opportunity had been taken to ring 8,000 young birds, but recoveries had been disappointing until this one was reported, showing that East African flamingos move up the Rift into Ethiopia.—*Editor*.

GUERRILLA WAR AGAINST NATURE

MUCH of mankind “has become involved in a kind of free-for-all guerilla warfare against nature, waged by burning and other forms of destruction familiar in such warfare”, said Max Nicholson, Director General of the Nature Conservancy, in his Horace Albright Conservation Lecture in California last year. In Latin America, for instance, the “scorched earth” methods which the Russians used against the Germans during the war are now being used by the inhabitants themselves against their own future interests in their own country. Forests of good timber are reduced to ashes, sources of water flow destroyed, and vast tonnages of soil shifted from the upland slopes to block navigable rivers, leaving spreading scars of erosion. “Even important international organisations for technical and economic aid are tacitly associated with these destructive practices.”

The blame for the continuance of this lamentable state of affairs he places largely on the ecologists. If they had put their house in order first they would now be able to demonstrate that ecology and conservation are as essential to the developers of natural resources as the agricultural sciences are to agriculture and the physical sciences to industry and defence. Another reason he suggests for the low status and relative ineffectiveness of the conservation movement is that conservationists have placed too much stress on a negative and defensive appeal, exploiting feelings of guilt at the extinction of species, the destruction of trees, the creation of dustbowls, erosion and so forth, instead of emphasising the positive and scientific aspects of conservation. They have also failed both to demonstrate the important educational potential and content of conservation, and to develop the professional standards necessary for a further advance on a wide front. The answers to many of these shortcomings he sees in the full development of the International Biological Programme, described on page 25.