

LESSER FLAMINGOS FIND PARADISE AT KENYA'S OLOIDIEN LAKE

Oxford. October 2006. Lesser Flamingos are surprising scientists by flocking to one of Kenya's smallest lakes for the first time, in their thousands. Lake Olodien is a volcanic crater lake found at the south west corner of Lake Naivasha, home to Kenya's largest flower farms and a popular tourist attraction. Olodien, which used to be connected to Naivasha, has steadily been going saline since its water levels fell and it became a separate lake in 1979. In July 2006 it passed the magic salinity mark and began to produce bacteria called Spirulina, the main food for lesser flamingos.

"Word is spreading that there is food at Olodien," says Earthwatch scientist Dr. David Harper of the University of Leicester. "Last time I looked there were nearly a quarter of a million flamingos there. Olodien water, though far too saline for humans or cattle to drink, is not too saline for flamingos. What we have is a remarkable and rare spectacle of groups of Lesser Flamingos feeding, drinking, and bathing in the same place."

This news follows the sudden deaths of hundreds of Lesser Flamingos at Lake Nakuru and Lake Elmenteita in March this year. Lake Olodien has not been without its mortalities; a few hundred Lesser Flamingos have already died, but in the case of all three sites the deaths accounted for only two per cent of the total population.

Dr. Harper continues, "In March, the Lesser Flamingo population suddenly increased on the main Kenyan lakes. At Nakuru, numbers grew from a few hundred thousand to almost a quarter of a million, Elmenteita's went from almost nothing to 70,000. The increase in numbers of healthy birds was accompanied by deaths, but at each lake, only two per cent of the population died. It is quite possible that the dead birds were weakened by their travels and became susceptible to disease spread quickly in their crowded groups."

In an effort to resolve the mystery of the flamingo deaths, Dr Harper will lead a research team at Lake Bogoria in November in partnership with Earthwatch, the University of Nairobi, National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Services and Tanzanian equivalent bodies. A veterinarian and a bacterial toxin expert will also be present. The team hope to examine all the main theories of flamingo mortality in order to provide the scientific and conservation community with answers.

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