Flamingos are making a home in Florida again after 100 years – an ecologist explains why they may be returning for good

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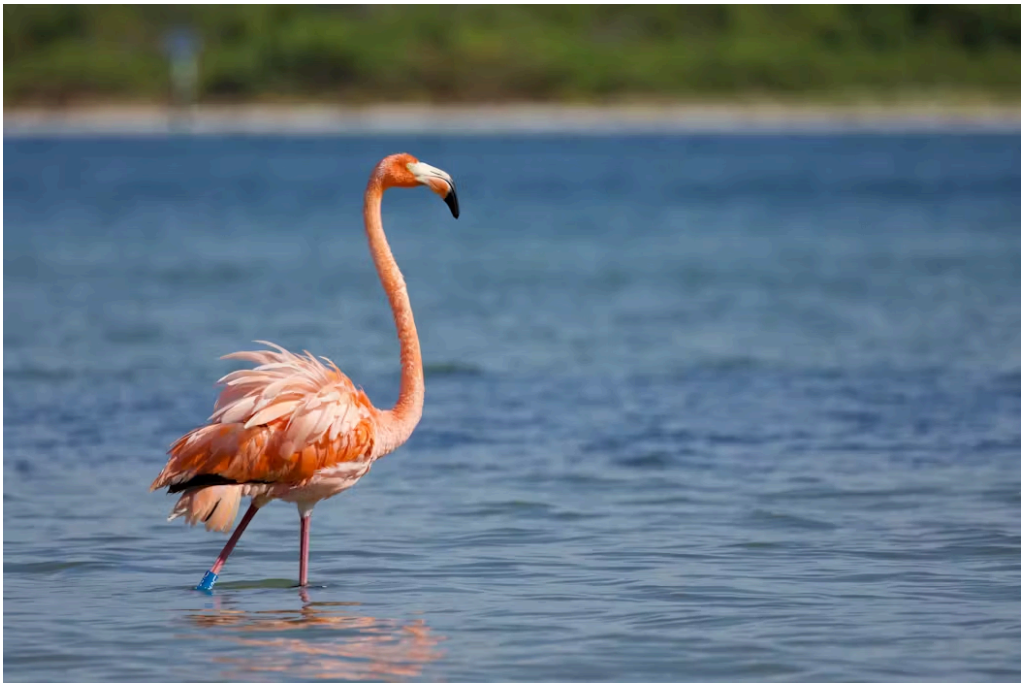
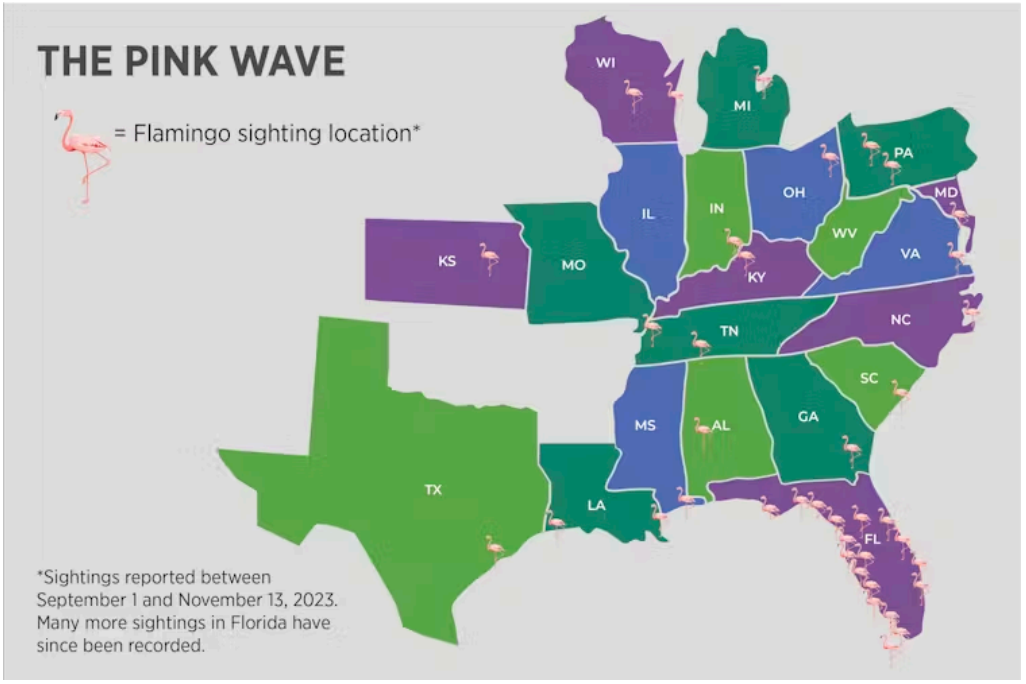


Peaches, who was blown into Florida by Hurricane Idalia in 2023, was sighted in Mexico in June 2025.

Kara Durda/Audubon Florida

Hurricane Idalia blew a flamboyance, or flock, of 300-400 flamingos that was likely migrating between the Yucatan Peninsula and Cuba off course in August 2023 and unceremoniously deposited the birds across a wide swath of the eastern United States, from Florida's Gulf Coast all the way up to Wisconsin and east to Pennsylvania.



After Hurricane Idalia, more than 300 credible sightings of flamingos across the eastern U.S. were reported.

Audubon Florida

I’m an estuarine scientist. That means I study ecosystems where fresh water flows into the ocean. I’ve spent 35 years with Audubon Florida studying the ecology of American flamingos and other wading birds in Florida Bay, Everglades National Park. So naturally, I was thrilled and intrigued by the sudden arrival of these flamingos.

One of the birds was rescued in the Tampa area after nearly drowning in the Gulf of Mexico. His rescuers named him Peaches.

A colleague and I were able to place a GPS tracking device and a bright blue band around his spindly leg, with the code “US02” engraved in white letters.

Melissa Edwards, Avian Hospital Director at Seaside Seabird Sanctuary, holds Peaches still while Dr. Frank Ridgley of Zoo Miami and the author, Dr. Jerome Lorenz, place a band and GPS tracker on his leg. Dr. Lorenz has banded or supervised the banding of nearly 3,000 roseate spoonbills, but Peaches was his first and only flamingo to date.

Linda Lorenz

We were hoping to track his movements and see whether he ended up settling in Florida. Unfortunately, a few days after Peaches was released back into the wilds of Tampa Bay, the tracking device failed. His last reported sighting was on a beach near Marco Island on Oct. 5, 2023.

Then, in June 2025, I received an email from colleagues at the Rio Lagartos Biosphere Reserve in Yucatan, Mexico, who had photographed Peaches, blue band still in place, nesting in the reserve.

Peaches' story is the latest piece in the historical puzzle of flamingos in Florida. Though the native population disappeared more than 100 years ago, recent events lead me to believe that flamingos may be coming back to the Sunshine State, and that their return has been facilitated by the concerted effort to restore the Everglades and coastal ecosystems.

Decimation of a population

In 1956, ornithologist and founder of the National Audubon's Everglades Science Center Robert Porter Allen wrote "The Flamingos: Their Life History and Survival," which is still considered a seminal document on the history of flamingos in Florida.

In his book, Allen cites several historical and scientific manuscripts from the 1800s that indicate flamboyances of hundreds to thousands were seen in the Everglades, Florida Bay and the Florida Keys.

Allen documents the demise of flamingos in the late 1800s, in Florida and throughout their Caribbean and Bahamian range. Like all wading birds in Florida, they fell victim to the women's fashion trend of adorning hats with bird feathers. Wading bird feathers were literally worth their weight in gold.

Led by the National Association of Audubon Societies' vocal opposition, the grassroots environmental movement that followed brought about laws prohibiting the hunting and sale of bird feathers. But enforcement of those laws in sparsely populated Florida was difficult, and on two occasions deputized Audubon wardens were murdered protecting wading bird nesting colonies.

Fortunately, within a few years, societal pressure turned the tide against the practice of wearing feathers. The passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 officially ended the feather trade.

Given legal protection, most species managed to reestablish huge nesting populations in the Everglades by the 1930s-1940s, presumably migrating from remote populations in Central America and the Caribbean.

Flamingos, however, did not.

A long road to recovery

In 1956, 40 years after hunting had ended, Allen estimated flamingo populations were only about 25% of what they had been in the previous century, with numbers plummeting from 168,000 to 43,000 breeding adults. They nested in significant numbers at only four locations, compared to 29 historically.

Flamingos' unique breeding behaviors and their longevity – they can live up to 50 years in the wild – may account for their struggle to bounce back. Other Florida wading birds can nest multiple times a year at different locations, laying three to five eggs at a time.

Flamingos, on the other hand, nest only once a year, generally returning to the same location year after year, and lay only one egg. Furthermore, they prefer forming huge nesting colonies, with thousands of nests, in part due to their elaborate group courtship rituals.

Reason to hope

As a result of their rarity from the 1950s to 1980s, scientists – including myself – believed that any flamingos sighted intermittently around Florida were not wild birds but rather escapees from captive populations.

The largest flock observed in the state between 1930 and 1976 was 14 birds spotted in Biscayne Bay in 1934, on the day after Hialeah Race Track in Miami imported a group of about 30 flamingos. The track's owners had failed to pinion the birds, and they simply flew away upon release.

But my opinion began to change in 2002, when a flamingo that was banded as a chick at Rio Lagartos was photographed in Florida Bay. In 2012, a second bird from Rio Lagartos was photographed.

By that time, I had observed flamingos in Florida Bay on several occasions, including larger flamboyances of 24 and 64 individuals. Although I still thought the majority of these flocks were escapees, the banded birds provided some evidence that at least a few wild flamingos were starting to spend time in Florida.

Then in 2015, my colleagues put a tracking device on a flamingo they had captured at the Key West Naval Air Station. Conchy, as we called him, was given the blue band US01 and released in Florida Bay in December 2015.

He lived in Florida Bay for two years, and the fact that he stayed for that long was proof to me that it was possible for flamingos to make a more permanent home in Florida.

In 2018, several colleagues and I published a paper laying out both evidence from historical accounts and also previously overlooked evidence from museums that flamingos were native to Florida. We also presented new data from researchers and citizen science portals that strongly indicated that wild flamingo numbers were increasing in Florida. This suggested that the population might be finally recovering.

Call it a comeback

Fast-forward to today, and it appears that this slow comeback may finally have legs. Six months after Hurricane Idalia, my colleagues at Audubon Florida and I conducted a weeklong online survey of flamingo sightings in Florida.

We received more than 50 reputable observations. After sorting through these observations to remove duplicates, we concluded that at least 100 flamingos were left in the state.

Then in July 2025, a flock of 125 individuals was photographed in Florida Bay. Based on our observations, my colleagues and I believe that the flamingos that arrived with Idalia may be reestablishing a home in Florida.

Progress toward restoration

The question is, why now? The 24 flamingos I saw in 1992 and the 64 I saw in 2004 didn’t take up permanent residence in the state. So what’s changed?

To me, the answer is clear: Efforts to restore the Everglades and Florida’s coastal ecosystems are beginning to show progress.

When I arrived in the Keys in 1989, Florida Bay was undergoing an ecological collapse. A 1993 interagency report by the federal government found that a hundred years of draining, diking and rerouting the flows of the Everglades to create urban and agricultural lands had raised the salt content of the water, making it uninhabitable for many estuarine animals.

The report noted that the bay’s famous seagrass beds were undergoing a massive die-off, accompanied by algal blooms that depleted oxygen levels, thereby killing fish in large numbers. Mangrove trees were dying on its myriad islands, and birds that for decades had nested in them had disappeared.

These events kick-started Everglades restoration efforts, and in 2000 the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan with nearly unanimous bipartisan support. With a cost in the tens of billions of dollars, it was to be the largest and most expensive ecological restoration project the world has ever seen.

Today, the bay’s health is vastly improved from the condition I observe in the 1980s. Water flow has gotten better, and the salinity is back to appropriate levels to support wildlife.

In 2018 and 2021, more than 100,000 pairs of wading birds such as white ibis, wood storks and roseate spoonbills nested in the Everglades. These numbers hadn’t been seen since the 1940s. In the 1980s and 1990s, 20,000 nesting pairs was thought to be a banner year.

While the Everglades and Florida Bay are still a long way from full restoration, I believe that the return of flamingos such as Conchy and Peaches is evidence that these efforts are on the right track.

Jerome Lorenz has received funding from The Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Family Foundation, the Batchelor Foundation and the Ron Magill Conservation Endowment. He is retired from the National Audubon Society but still does some volunteer work for the Everglades Science Center.