

# Flamingo chicks hatch

The second batch of hatchlings has arrived on Kimberley's Kamfers Dam, South Africa's only breeding colony of the birds – but their future is far from certain

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As developers prepare to construct a multimillion rand commercial and residential township on the shores of the Kamfers Dam in Kimberley, the threatened lesser flamingo colony is nurturing its new arrivals – more than 100 chicks.

This is the second consecutive year that the Kamfers Dam flamingos, the only breeding colony of lesser flamingo in South Africa, are expanding their numbers, much to the delight of bird conservationists who believe this will become an annual event that could save the flamingo population in Southern Africa.

Mark Anderson, the executive director of Birdlife South Africa, said the first chick was spotted on November 18. The number of chicks, which will soon be seen by "flamcam" on Africam's website, was growing daily.

Anderson said the first egg was laid on October 23 and there were already hundreds, perhaps thousands, of eggs on the S-shaped man-made island. The breeding event was six weeks earlier than last summer, perhaps an indication of the flamingos' acceptance of the new breeding site, he said.

Lesser flamingos are listed as "near-threatened" in the Red Data books, mainly because of a declining population, various human-induced threats and a limited number of breeding sites. The birds previously bred only at Lake Natron in Tanzania, Etosha Pan in Namibia and Sua Pan in Botswana. Kamfers Dam is the fourth African breeding site.

The Kamfers Dam breeding



**Threatened:** A Lesser Flamingo tends its chick, above, on the man-made island in Kamfers Dam, Kimberley, right, which has become the fourth nesting ground in Africa, and the only one in South Africa, for the threatened birds

island was constructed by Ekapa Mining and the Northern Cape department of tourism, environment and conservation in September 2006. It is the only artificial breeding island for lesser flamingos in the world.

After 1 000 artificial nest turrets were built on the island to assist with breeding, the flamingos apparently ignored these, constructing 8 517 of their own from clay.

Birders believe the artificial turrets may have served as an "aphrodisiac", causing the flamingos to breed in little more than a year after the completion of construction. The flamingos bred last summer, with an estimated 9 000 chicks being produced.

"If one considers that the Southern African lesser flamingo population only numbers about 100 000 individuals, Kamfers Dam contributed significantly to this relatively small population during the past summer," Anderson said.



The Kamfers Dam lesser flamingo colony made history and hit the headlines in January when the first chicks were observed, representing the first time in recorded history that lesser flamingos had bred in South Africa. The event was billed as a significant achievement for the people and organisations involved in the project.

To monitor the breeding flamingos, the Save the Flamingo Association installed a small camera on the island, allowing conservationist to monitor any illegal activity or disturbance of the colony on a 24-hour

basis. Next year a PhD student from the United States will also be using the camera for scientific research on the colony, which has received national and international acclaim as one of the most important bird conservation projects in decades.

Anderson, who was suspended by the provincial conservation department with two colleagues for their roles in trying to save the flamingos, earlier this year received the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement Award in Madagascar for his contribution towards the project.







A lesser flamingo at Kamfers Dam, where the threatened colony is nurturing 100 chicks. The island on the dam is the only man-made flamingo breeding site in the world

Shortly afterwards he received a BirdLife South Africa Owl Award for his contribution to flamingo conservation.

But it was not the good news that drew the world's attention to the breeding colony. It was the concern raised by conservationists about the effect the town's malfunctioning sewerage system, which supplies the dam with most of its water, and the proposed Northgate development, would have on the birds.

This led to the suspension of Anderson, Julius Koen, the deputy director of conservation, and Eric

Herrmann of scientific services in September, and the creation of the Save the Flamingo Association.

Mandla Ndzilili, a department spokesman, said the suspensions had nothing to do with efforts to save the flamingoes, but rather with claims that the men had used state property to conduct a private campaign. Although Herrmann was reinstated because of lack of evidence, disciplinary processes against Koen and Anderson – who no longer works for the department -- have yet to be finalised.

Despite vociferous opposition

from conservation bodies, earlier this month the province issued a record of decision giving the go-ahead for the construction of a shopping mall, about 4 000 houses and flats in secure complexes, churches and schools at Kamfers Dam.

The Save the Flamingo Association and BirdLife SA are among the conservation bodies that have objected to the conditions set out in the record of decision.

They have indicated that, if their appeal to the province fails, they will seek to halt the development through the courts.