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INVASION OF THE FLAMINGO SNATCHERS: LESSER FLAMINGO *PHOENICOPTERUS MINOR* TRAPPED BY A MUSSEL

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The saltworks at Swakopmund, Namibia, are a haven for shorebirds, terns and both Greater *Phoenicopterus roseus* and Lesser Flamingo *P. minor*. The wide salt pans offer good opportunity to feed and to roost and the shallow waters allow protection against and easy sighting of predators, especially jackals that come from the Namib desert to search for food along the sea shore.

While watching birds at the salt pans on 24 of February 2014 we found dozens of Lesser Flamingos in one pan, smoothly walking away from our approaching car. All but one - which was unable to move from his spot.

We could not figure out a reason, but saw it being held back in the water. Had someone put out nooses to catch birds?

Mark Boorman entered the water and freed the bird. To our surprise, a mussel had closed around the foot of the flamingo, clinging tightly to it. The mussel itself was partly overgrown by seaweed and smaller mussels and had attached to the ground by its adhesive byssal threads.

The bivalve is most likely to be the Mediterranean Mussel, *Mytilus galloprovincialis*, which is very common at these saltworks



Fig 1 - Flamingos in the salt pans near Swakopmund

(M. Romero, pers. comm.) It is an invasive species, produced in aquaculture for human consumption, which has spread from the Mediterranean Sea and the European Atlantic coast to the Northern Pacific coast of the America and East Pacific (Japan, Russia, North Korea). Although native to the Southern Hemisphere, no original *Mytilus* populations existed in southern Africa. Only from 1984 on was it introduced from Europe. Now it is the dominant low intertidal mussel on the West Coast. *M. galloprovincialis* has also established in New Zealand, Australia and South America (Marshall *et al.* 2015).

We imagined the bird would have starved or drowned or maybe the mussel would have opened again? We removed the mollusc, and after ringing the flamingo with a metal ring (right leg, Safring number 9A06950) and colour ring (left, green, engraved NFN) we released the bird. It was in good condition and this time it flew away.

- oo0oo -



Fig 2 - Rescuing the trapped flamingo.



Fig 3 - Foot held by the mussel.

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Fig 4 - Lesser Flamingo with ring on tibia.

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