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## **Fussy flamingos take wing after salt strike drains their nesting site**

Charles Bremner in Paris

A strike by salt workers in the Camargue delta has prevented pink flamingos from breeding in France for the first time in more than three decades.

The birds, which are very particular about where they set up home, turned away from the Camargue and set course for Spain, Italy and Turkey when they found that water was missing from around their favourite man-made islet.

Experts at the Mediterranean wetlands at the mouth of the Rhône are hoping that a settlement of the strike last month will encourage the colony of about 15,000 great flamingos — one of the Mediterranean's biggest — to return to nest and reproduce in the new year.

The flamingos are one of the big attractions of the great wilderness south of Arles, an environmentally fragile mix of salt lagoons, ranches and rice farms, which is famous for horses, fighting bulls and wildlife. President Sarkozy picked the Camargue for a photo opportunity in April, shortly before his election, and is watching conservation efforts closely.

The water was missing from the brine lagoon at Fangassier last March because workers at Salin-de-Giraud, a town of 2,000 that is dependent on the salt industry, were resisting a redundancy plan. Supported by the local population, the 126 staff staged a partial strike against the Salins du Midi company and failed to pump in to the lagoon the seawater that is dried to make thousands of tonnes of industrial salt each year.

The flamingos pick small islands for building their mud nests to avoid predators such as foxes and boar. Their food also comes from the water. The birds' choice of the Camargue islet was a triumph for conservationists. It is an artificial spot, built by ornithologists in 1969 to lure back flamingos after flood management on the Rhône had damaged the habitat in which they had nested for centuries.

“It was a textbook success for sustainable development,” said Jean Jalbert, the director of the Tour du Valat, the Camargue research centre for conserving Mediterranean wetlands. Mr Jalbert and other experts are confident that the flamingos will return, provided that conditions are right. Flamingos do not reproduce every year.

They form pairs to build volcano-shaped foot-high nests of mud and stones, and both partners take turns to sit on the egg. The failure to breed in France will have little impact on the Mediterranean population, Mr Jalbert said. “The birds live up to 40 years, so a gap of one year in their reproduction should not have dramatic consequences.” The salt company, one of two operating in the Camargue, has agreed to maintain a reduced output and manage the brine lagoons, employing half the workforce. Redundant staff will be trained to work in tourism and conservation.

### **Birds of a feather**

— The greater flamingo, *Phoenicopterus ruber*, is the only species of the bird that breeds in Europe. Their population is thought to be between 14,000 and 35,000 pairs

— There are estimated to be only 30 major breeding colonies worldwide, where the flamingos number tens of thousands

— The last flamingo sighting in Britain was in Essex in 2004. It is thought to have escaped from a reserve or zoo

Sources: [birdguides.com](http://birdguides.com); Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

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