

Ardastra gardens – Conservation marches on....

Charles Duncombe

What's pink and goes round in circles? No it's not my whites after I put a red sock in the washing machine. It has to be the marching flamingos of Ardastra gardens...

Opened in 1937 Ardastra gardens have been in the vanguard of the fight to save a previously dwindling population of flamingos in the Bahamas. Formerly threatened from all angles, ranging from hunting to low flying aircraft in world war two, the national bird of the Bahamas was very close to disappearing from the islands altogether.

However the garden's work has combined with other local and national initiatives to help the population of this wonderful bird to recover to around 60,000 today.

Marching up and down in unison with heads swivelling, a flamingo's natural flocking habit resembles an army on parade. It was that image which gave the founder of Ardastra Gardens the idea to use their natural display to attract visitors to the gardens and increase the awareness of the bird and the dangers it faced.

With a breeding colony still at Ardastra, a couple of times a day a platoon of these pink paraders come out on manoeuvres. They merrily march around their parade ground with tourists watching around the edges and taking photographs. The brave observers though are conscripted to join in the display. It was a fantastic sight to see the smile on children's faces as they disappear into a sea of pink feathers as they marched by.

There is a lot more to the gardens though than this battalion of birds. As you follow the walkways nestled within tropical plants you are often stopped in your tracks by the population of peacocks that wander free throughout.

My favourite birds at the gardens though have to be the lory parrots. These brightly coloured birds have a distinctive, sharp red beak which is designed to prize open fruit. I therefore walked into their aviary with a slight amount of trepidation as I had a slice of apple in my hand. It wasn't quite like walking into the lion's den with a steak in my hand but it did feel like it!

I held the apple out in my hand and faced a bird with the least intimidating beak. Nothing happened ... until whoosh ... I felt a blast of air on my right ear and a bird swooped from behind and on to my hand. It then proceeded to delicately use its beak to carve out neat chunks from the apple. I couldn't believe how tidy this bird was as it nibbled at the apple. I was half expecting it to produce a perfectly whittled sculpture of myself by the time it had finished. Instead it ate the flesh, left the skin (they must be well fed to be that fussy!) and flew off.

But it's not just birds that the gardens are now known for. Over the years the population of other animals has increased and now you can see snakes, monkeys, capybara and a jaguar to name just a few.

So if you are on holiday in the Bahamas and are looking for both enjoyment and education then I suggest you join the army down at Ardastra Gardens.

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