



Photos by Daniel V. Klein

Dave feeds an Inca Tern.

When I began my work at the National Aviary in 2001, I was looking for a relaxing and challenging place to restructure my career. I started working as an aviculturist, and found the peacefulness of the birds soothing, yet intriguing. In 2003 I participated in an American Flamingo conservation study on the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. One morning I woke just before the other researchers, and noticed something I had missed before. The flamingos were dancing!

Like a strangely choreographed ballet, they all completed the same routine. At times it seemed random, at other times perfectly in sync, but the “dance” was unmistakable: a foot slap in the water, the preening of the feathers on the chest and back, the graceful outstretching of one leg and one wing, then a final bow forward with both wings jetting out like a salute. I recorded the vocalizations during the dance, and brought the recording home to study and listen to when I wanted to remember the magical sight I’d seen that morning.

One day while recording music on my home computer, I put the flamingo sounds file on the computer to save them permanently. I then accidentally opened a music program which enabled me to see the visual waveform of their recorded vocalizations. I stopped for a moment and thought, “What sound could I make that would replicate the calls of a flamingo?”

I tried various instruments and sounds from a synthesizer, but could not come close to matching the waveforms. Out of frustration I slapped my hands on my upper legs. I happened to have a microphone on in the room, and I saw that the clap sound I had produced filled the waveform almost perfectly. I had struck gold!

After listening to the recording all the way through several times, I was able to match the sound waves using a carefully timed pattern of clapping. I then began thinking about how I could take what I had learned and use it to call to the five flamingos in the American Wetlands room.

I knew that in the wild older flamingos situate themselves on an elevated mud flat and vocalize to tell the younger flamingos to begin the dance. “This will work well,” I thought, “because in the Wetlands Room the visitors and I are elevated on an observation deck.” After a few trial runs and fine-tuning with the Aviary’s flamingos, I was able to find the right speed and duration of human clapping to trigger a natural behavior in our birds, the Flamingo Dance.

I hope you will come and see the flamingos dancing at the National Aviary. I love it when I see the natural behaviors that birds exhibit inspire and touch the people who visit. That is what we are all about!

Visitors to the National Aviary can view and even participate in the Flamingo Dance during daily 2 p.m. feedings in the Wetlands Room. Call ahead to be sure that Dave is the presenter on the day you are planning to visit, as he alone conducts the dance.

Daily Schedule of Encounters and Activities

10:30	Raptor Encounter	Atrium
11:30	Kitchen Window	Hallway
1:30	Penguin Premier	Atrium
2:00	Feeding Time	Wetlands
3:00	Feeding Time	Tropical Forest
3:30	Rainstorm	Wetlands

Check www.aviary.org for the summer schedule, starting Memorial Day weekend.