A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

NATURAL TREASURES OF UGANDA
A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

by

Dennis Lubega

Illustrated by Nicholas Kagongo Arinaitwe
“Our next topic this morning is going to be about a bird called the lesser flamingo. How many of you know this bird?” asked Mr. Muhwezi, our geography teacher.

None of us knew and none of us made a move in the hopes of not being called upon.

“Most of you actually know it,” continued the teacher when he realized that no pupil was willing to speak up. “It’s probably just that the times you’ve come across it, you’ve not been able to identify it as the lesser flamingo.”

Mr. Muhwezi sat behind his desk and slowly put his hands behind his head, raising his elbows high as if pointing them to some unknown bird flying above the school or perhaps simply in an effort to fly himself. At this point, we knew he was preparing to tell us a story. One could hear a pin drop in the classroom when he started his stories. We loved his way of teaching tremendously, not only because it gave us a break from boring lessons, but because it allowed us to travel a bit to other places, at least in our imagination.

“Once upon a time, but not such a long time ago,” began our teacher, “a young lesser flamingo named Christopher grew tired of flying over the same lake in Kenya over and over again. One morning after a long breakfast Christopher told his friends, ‘Today I’m going to fly away in search of my soul.’

‘Your what?’ responded Beatrice, his older sister and guardian. ‘What are you talking about now?’
'My soul. You know, my reason for being, my purpose, my destiny…’ explained Christopher assuredly. ‘I feel as though I was made for doing something more than hanging out in this Kenyan Lake, with all these pink birds around. This is beginning to bore me. I want to discover new places, know new things, and meet new birds. Is anyone coming with me?’

The little bird did not realize that he too was one of the many ‘pink birds’, lesser flamingos, living in Lake Nakuru in central Kenya. He felt different and saw himself as multi-colored.

The little bird’s sister and friends were not sure whether such an adventurous flight would be a success or failure. They feared what was on the other side of the hills and none of them dared venture to another land or country. They were perfectly satisfied with their home and the comfort that home brings. They all knew of other birds from their flock who flew each year to a distant place in the nearby country of Uganda, but none of them had the courage to do the same.

Christopher was indeed different.

So they all said, ‘Sorry, Christopher, we will not be going on such a journey. Not this time. But we shall certainly consider it next year.’ They shook their heads nervously, knowing very well they would not be going next year, or the following year, or ever! Christopher’s friends would never consider it because they were simply satisfied with what they had. They wanted to encourage Christopher
to stay with them so they thought it best to ask him to wait and postpone his adventure for another time.

Christopher knew they were not serious and he was frustrated that they were all controlled by their fear of the unknown. All of a sudden, the young lesser flamingo started running through the water and took to the air shouting goodbye to everyone as he started to fly away. He joined a flock of other birds just like him migrating west in the direction flocks seemed to fly each year around the month of September. Beatrice and all of Christopher’s friends stood motionless with their beaks wide open, stunned that he finally had the courage to do what he had wanted to do for years.

In order to avoid disturbing the other older birds on his journey and so as not to draw too much attention to himself, Christopher flew as high as he could without
loosing his breath. He knew he had limitations but this time he was going to push himself higher and further. It was a challenge that he dreamed of and now it was finally happening.

After he had flown for many hours with tired wings and an empty stomach, he realized the flock was descending rapidly towards a pool of water that was unlike anything he had ever dreamed of.

‘Gosh!’ he yelled excitedly, ‘this land looks so much greener than our own land back at home. And this lake in the middle of a volcano seems to be more like a large jewel, or maybe a pearl in an oyster.’

One of the older birds overheard Christopher talking to himself that that the young bird might need someone to talk to. He explained, ‘This is a shallow alkaline crater lake. Isn’t it amazing? Can you believe all of our relatives do not trust us when we tell them there is such a beautiful place in Uganda?’

These lakes were perfect places for lesser flamingos to live and nest! Here the flock of thousands who had made the long journey would never go hungry as the lake waters were filled with tasty and nutritious micro water organisms.

‘Let me try out this food,’ Christopher said as he dipped into the cold and crystal clear water of the lake. He took a gulp of water and filtered it out through the bristles in his beak, only to find that he was able to catch thousands
of micro organisms, his favorite food, in one gulp. ‘Perfect! If only we had this much food in our lake back home!’

After a month of feasting in the lake, his feathers started to turn a bright pink, just like the color of the food he’d been eating. He stuck out his chest with a new found sense of pride, never having been so pink in all his life. As the feathers of flamingos change according to their diet, Christopher knew all of his friends would enjoy their new bright colors if he could convince them to join him the following year.

While some of the older birds who had flown in the flock to this new paradise were beginning to take flight again, Christopher did not wish to leave the water just yet. The hot weather had warmed it and it gave his body a rare feeling of pleasure.
‘This water feels so fresh and new. Let me wade in it and enjoy one last time this new world where everyone can eat and play as long as they like.’ With that, Christopher dove into the clear water and swam quickly to the middle of the lake. His large webbed feet made him one of the fastest swimmers among his friends back in Kenya. The young lesser flamingo swam and swam until his body was quite refreshed. ‘Ah, that was good,’” he said. ‘This is something I want to do every year.”

When he finally he climbed out of the water, an idea struck him and he started to look for something he had forgotten about during the past weeks. But he did not have to look very far before finding it. ‘This is a miracle! Almost everything that I might need to build a new home is here!” he sighed as he looked down at the mud he’d been searching for. “This type of mud can
build me a strong nest in which my future wife might safely lay her eggs. What a perfect place!’ he exclaimed as if pleasantly surprised. It was indeed a natural paradise, a wonderful new home for Christopher and the thousands of adventurous curious lesser flamingos. ‘Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.’ He continued to exclaim as he looked around for more mud.

Dusk was advancing fast so he had to find a place to sleep on his last night. He preferred sleeping near the other birds, not knowing what sort of predators could be in Uganda. When he went to sleep that night, he had made up his mind about one thing: he would definitely return with his friends next year to this ‘home away from home’.
He missed his friends and family back in Kenya but he knew when he returned, he would be able to convince at least a few of them to join him, now that he knew what the unknown was all about. He would tell them that he had found the perfect home away from home, if ever there was such a thing. It is only by going away and seeing new things that we can best appreciate what we have at home, he thought.

‘This place is simply fantastic! Unfortunately, I don’t know its name.’ He heard the other birds saying ‘Uganda this and Uganda that’ but that was all he knew
about where he was. As he closed his eyes to sleep that evening, he knew that what he had found was even better than his home in Kenya. Uganda was naturally beautiful, naturally comfortable, and naturally the best spot that lesser flamingos could dream about.

Christopher knew more than ever that he was truly unique. He had made lots of new friends on this journey, birds that also loved adventure and the spirit of being bird citizens of the world, not just Kenyans. He knew now that even if his friends back home did not want to travel with him next year, he would have lots of fun and adventures with all of his new friends.

As he returned high into the sky to make the journey back to lake Nakuru with his new friends, he saw a sign post that read, “The Albertine Rift”.

‘Ah, so this is the famous Albertine Rift indeed!’ He said to one of the birds in the adventurous flock. ‘Good! I now know two places in this wonderful world: the Eastern Rift Valley where I live at Lake Nakuru, and the spectacular Albertine Rift in the west.’

He soared higher than everyone and thought to himself, my life as a world traveler has finally begun and quite frankly, while my friends at home will never believe me, this life comes naturally to me. Without a doubt, he knew that this was how he was intended to live. Nature had made him to be a traveler at heart.”
As Mr. Muhwezi lowered his elbows to indicate the end of his story, we realized that our classmate Thomas was sleeping like a baby in the back row. He must have been having a bad dream when all of the sudden he started to scream, “I don’t want to fly away, you cannot make me fly away. This is where I always want to be.”

Mr. Muhwezi chuckled the way he always did when Thomas began to talk in his sleep during his stories. With a loud shout from our teacher, “Wake up,” Thomas jumped up in surprise and his face turned a deep shade of red.

We all laughed when Mr. Muhwezi claimed that Thomas must have been eating beetroots for lunch for his face was now changing colors, just like the flamingos!

With that, Mr. Muhwezi ended his story and asked us to open our books to the lesson on page 45: Migration of the Lesser Flamingos from the Eastern Rift Valley to the Albertine Rift. We all looked around at each other with big grins on our faces. It was wonderful to have such a great teacher who was indeed a natural storyteller. It made learning seem so much more….natural!

THE END
Facts about Lesser Flamingos

1. What do lesser flamingo birds use to build their nests?
   
   Mud. They make it into mounds in which they lay their eggs

2. What causes the feathers of lesser flamingo birds to change colors?
   
   They change colors according to the color of the food they eat.

3. What exists in a lesser flamingo bird’s mouth to filter out food from the water?
   
   Bristles

4. During which month each year do lesser flamingo birds migrate from the Eastern Rift Valley to Queen Elizabeth National Park in the Albertine Rift Valley?
   
   September

5. Why are lesser flamingo birds good swimmers?
   
   Because they have webbed feet

6. What do lesser flamingo birds eat?
   
   Micro water organisms
Learning more about nature allows us to understand our environment, respect our wildlife friends, and share our experiences with others.

Be a friend of the natural treasures of Uganda and act responsibly when interacting with your environment.

About the Author

Dennis Patrick Musisi Lubega began his interest in stories at the age of two. Then it was mostly children’s stories on TV and folktales told by his mother. Dennis has never lost this passion. Although he trained in business studies, the forty year-old recently decided to begin a new career as a writer for children and young adults. As a result of this decision, he has written several stories—*The First Claim*, *The Laughing Lion*, *The Short Giraffe that Wanted a Little Respect*, *The Monkey Christmas Dinner*, and *Late on PLE Day*, among others. The Natural Treasures of Uganda series of environmental education books is his first set of books to be published. Mr. Lubega lives in Kampala, Uganda, and is married with one child.

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With Special Thanks to Wildlife Clubs of Uganda, Uganda Wildlife Authority, Nature Uganda, and the Jane Goodall Institute.

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