

Phineas Staunton's Expedition to South America

by Lynne Belluscio

I have always been curious about Phineas Staunton's expedition to South America. Why would the former head of Ingham University's Art School and husband of Emily Ingham join an expedition with the Smithsonian Institution in 1867 at the age of fifty? He had served as a Colonel with the 100th New York Volunteers during the Civil War and had returned to Le Roy in 1862.

For the next five years he served in various capacities at Ingham. He painted several significant paintings but for some reason, and the histories don't really give many details, he agreed to join an expedition to South America sponsored by Williams College and the Smithsonian Institution. Dr. Orton, from the University of Rochester, organized the expedition and supposedly hired Staunton to make illustrations of the flora and fauna. As far as anyone knows, Staunton did not have experience drawing floral and animal specimens. He was better known for his portraits and allegorical scenes, so why did he agree to go on the expedition?

I carefully read an account of the expedition and I found a clue. The expedition's purpose was to explore parts of South America and gather "treasures of Science and Art for the Institutions they represented." It is reported that the party left New York around the first of July, crossed the Isthmus, landed at Guayaquil, and went by mule north to Quito. The plan then was to cross the Andes ... There it was!! The expedition was headed for the Andes Mountains. I suddenly knew why Staunton had joined the expedition.

Recently, while doing a Google search, I came across some very interesting information. Located high in the Andes Mountains is the salt basins of the Alacama Desert. Known as the "Dragon's Back" few plants and animals can live in the area. In the winter the nights can fall to minus 20 degrees. One of the rare species that lives in the region is the golden viscacha rat, which can

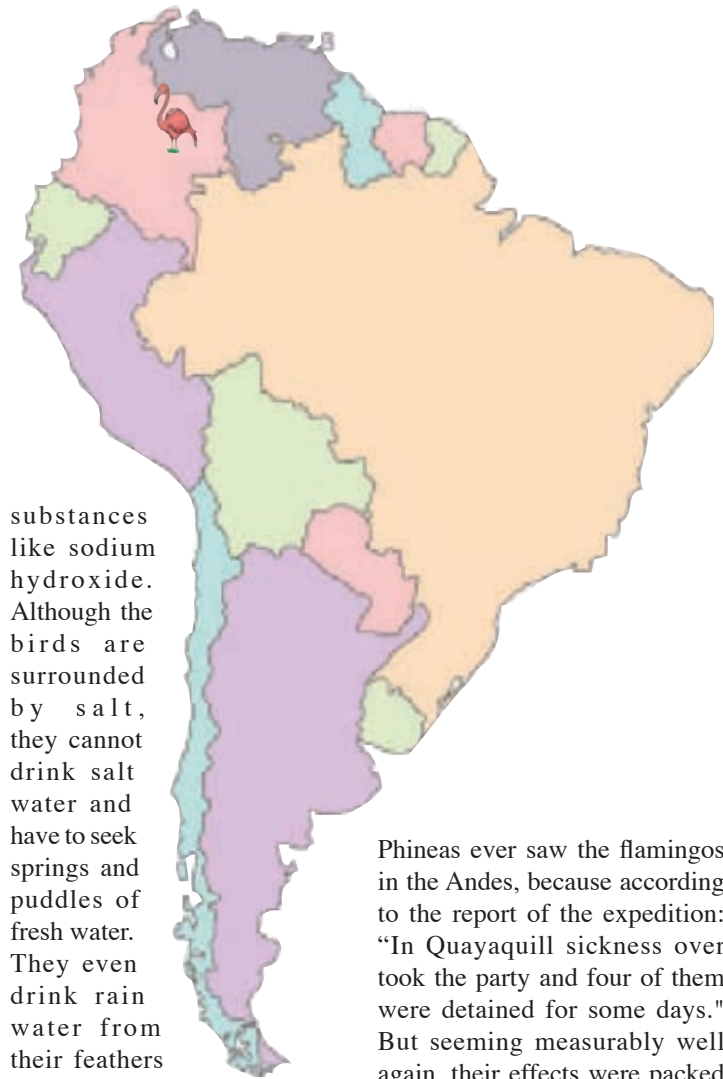
eat the salt bush. It lives in high mounds which offer the rat protection from the floodwaters that arise each summer when the monsoon-like rains and runoff from the surrounding mountains flood the salt flats.

The viscacha is related to the chinchilla and has chisel-shaped lower incisors but it has an extra set of upper incisors that enables it to eat the salt bush. The extra teeth are actually stiffened bristles of hair gathered into bundles. With three sets of teeth, the rat can strip the salt from the salt bush leaves, which makes the plant edible.

The salt flats also are filled with brine shrimp, which are distantly related to the shrimp that we eat, but cannot live in the open ocean. The brine shrimps' only defense is its habitat of hyper-saline water. It is the brine shrimp and the hyper-saline water that attracted the objects of Phineas' search. He came to the Andes to sketch the three species of flamingos that live high in the mountains. In fact, the Central Andes is the only place on earth where three flamingo species can be seen feeding side by side: the James's, the Andean and the Chilean.

The James's flamingo is also known as the Puna flamingo and is a small delicate bird about 3 feet tall with pale pink plumage and bright carmine streaks around the neck and back. It has brick red legs and bill. (In 1924 the James's flamingo was thought to be extinct, but was rediscovered in 1957.) The James's flamingo is closely related to the larger Andean flamingo which has yellow legs and feet and a larger black area on the beak. The Chilean is the largest flamingo found in the Andes. It is related to the large Caribbean and Greater flamingo. The Chilean can be differentiated by its grayish legs and pink knees.

The James and Andean flamingoes feed entirely on tiny diatoms while the Chilean flamingo favors the brine shrimp. The flamingo's bill enables the bird to filter out caustic, harmful



substances like sodium hydroxide. Although the birds are surrounded by salt, they cannot drink salt water and have to seek springs and puddles of fresh water. They even drink rain water from their feathers and like other seabirds they have special glands in their nostrils that can expel salt from their bodies. The flamingos are attracted to the salt flats of the Andes not only because of the food, but because of the isolation and inaccessible habitat that deters predators.

During the years that Phineas had spent in Le Roy after the Civil War, he had noticed that the number of flamingos that returned each year on April 1 was declining. Like everyone in Le Roy, he was concerned. When he learned of the flamingos in the Andes Mountains that lived in a cold climate in the salt flats, he wondered if they might be brought to Le Roy. He knew that salt would be discovered in Le Roy and if the salt could be pumped to the surface and held shallow ponds, that the South American flamingos would feel right at home and that they could withstand the cold winters. But we will never know for sure if

Phineas ever saw the flamingos in the Andes, because according to the report of the expedition: "In Quayaquil sickness overtook the party and four of them were detained for some days." But seeming measurably well again, their effects were packed upon mules for the journey up the mountains two hundred miles to the City of Quito. That city, just under the Equator, yet occupying one of the highest inhabited points on the globe and enjoying a temperature of eternal spring, forms the center of one of the finest landscapes in the world. Eight snowy peaks of the Andes skirt the horizon and look down upon the city ... Borne on the shoulders of four men, weak, exhausted but sustained by the magnificent scenery all around him, Phineas entered Quito." But Phineas died in Quito on September 5, 1867 and was buried in the midst of the mountains in a Protestant cemetery.

So we will never know if Phineas ever saw the flamingos in the Andes Mountains. His sketches have never been found, but perhaps we have discovered the reason why he ever went to South America in the first place.