Hey, Big! Peter J., Age 7, Wants to Know: If a Flamingo Eats a Blueberry, Will It Turn Blue?

It's true that flamingos get their color from the foods they eat. Depending on where they live, they may dine on brine shrimp, small clams or fish, adult insects, insect larvae, and algae. Yum! These foods, especially the algae, are rich in chemicals called carotenoids. Inside a flamingo's body, carotenoids are changed into pigments that color feathers pink.

Before scientists understood the connection between a flamingo's diet and its color, keepers puzzled over why the pink birds turned white in zoos. Now they feed flamingos a carotene-rich diet—ground beets or carrots, grains, fish meal, nutritious pellets, and vitamin and mineral supplements—to keep their birds "in the pink."

Eat More Shrimp!

Still, flamingos fade when caring for their young. Unlike their chicks, mama and papa birds don't eat much. This decreases the amount of pigment stored in their feathers, so they lose color.

In the wild, flamingos live in shallow lakes and lagoons—far away from woodlands where blueberry bushes grow. But Dr. Kevin McGraw, who studies feather color in birds at Arizona State University, guesses that if a flamingo were to eat enough blueberries, it would probably still turn light pink, not blue! That's because anthocyanins, the pigments that make blueberries blue, are changed into colorless chemicals that aren't deposited in bird feathers. But small amounts of carotenoids are also found in blueberries, and would probably lightly color the feathers pink.

Hey, Kids! Have any questions you want answered? Send them to Ask, 332 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago, IL 60604, or send them by email to ask@caruspub.com.