



5.3 Some species use very sophisticated methods of communication in order to maintain their relative distance in space such that they can remain able to act as a group

'Keep in touch'

Like many common phrases, 'keep in touch' is now so fully embedded in everyday language that we hardly notice what it really means. Today the instruction is probably interpreted as 'write a letter', 'make a 'phone call' or perhaps 'send an e-mail'. Of course, literally it means do not move so far away we cannot continue to touch each other. This metaphorically rather than physically describes the larger of the two distances that are common to a species. Like personal distance, it varies between species. It represents the maximum distance over which a society can operate successfully, and is thus known as 'social distance'. It is of course largely determined by the species' methods of communication. Some animals have very sophisticated methods of communication using sound or even ultrasound, while others rely entirely on direct line of sight (Fig. 5.3). It is also noticeable that many species organize their societies in space in such a way as to maintain maximum communication within the group and maximum perception of danger or opportunity beyond it. A flock of flamingos will thus not only all feed together within their rather small social distance, but always ensure that various members of the group are facing in different directions (Fig. 5.4) Through this mechanism one member of the society may detect danger and communicate it apparently instantaneously to the whole group, who respond with movement apparently in unison as their flight distance is triggered.