

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 24 – March 3, 2019 | Written by Susan and Burt Mittelstadt



With Hosts: Susan and Burt Mittelstadt and 12 participants: Mariel, Roy, Jill, Maggie, Baird, Janis, Chuck, Mary, Peggy, Bobbie, Julia and Janet.



Saturday, Nov. 23 | Antisana National Park

Before flying to the Galápagos, our group of fourteen travelers took an excursion to Antisana National Park to see creatures of the high Andes. Rain was predicted for the afternoon, so we got an early start despite some late-night arrivals. Despite the predictions, it was as clear a day as one could hope in the mountains. Manuel was our knowledgeable guide and Jonathon our expert driver: our goal was the Andean Condor. At the first pullout it was clear we weren't at sea level. Despite pounding hearts and fuzzy heads, (the elevation all morning was near or over 13,000') we were all thrilled with instant success. Andean Condors were spotted by Maggie, at rest on cliffs across the deep canyon. Manuel set up his spotting scope and showed us how to take great photos with our phones and the scope.

The day continued to amaze. Condors were spotted at a total of three locations with one very close flyby. Lunch

was a delicious Andean feast. After lunch, the rain started to come down just as we pulled away to head for our hotel. Here's what else we found that day:



Andean duck | Silvery Grebe | Eared Dove | White-collared Swift | Sparkling Violetear | Ecuadorian Hillstar | Black-tailed Trainbearer | Tyrian Metaltail | Shining Sunbeam | Giant Hummingbird | Slate-colored Coot | Andean Lapwing | Andean Gull | Black-faced Ibis | Andean Condor | Cinereous Harrier | Variable Hawk | Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle | Carunculated Caracara | Tawny Antpitta | Stout-billed Cinclodes | Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant | Sedge Wren | Great Thrush | Paramo Pipit | Rufous-collared Sparrow | Black Flowerpiercer | Plumbeous Sierra-Finch | Plain-colored Seedeater | White-tailed Deer | Feral Dog | Andean Rabbit | Alpaca | Feral horse

Sunday, Feb. 24 | Galápagos Day One: Arrival in San Cristobal

We were met at the airport by the brother and sister team of guides, Ivan (I-love) and Karina, and four more passengers of our ship, the Eric. These two very experienced guides got us to the Eric for lunch and a safety drill, and then we were back in our pangas for a visit to the Galapaguera, a tortoise breeding facility on the Island of San Cristobal. At the port we found our first creatures of the Galápagos. There were sea lions, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Blue-footed Boobies and a Green Heron. In Galapaguera, we saw our first of Darwin's finches and learned about efforts to restore the archipelago's land tortoise populations. The highlight bird was our first of two woodpecker finches. We also were introduced to the poison apple tree. The rainy season was well underway, and the island was lush with greenery and the air heavy with humidity. Our winter escapees had found a warm refuge. That evening we met the crew and toasted to our great luck to all come together on the fantastic final voyage of the Eric. Our evening meal was the first of many tasty meals. Sleepyheads one and all, we hit the racks and motored all night towards Genovesa.

Smooth-billed Ani | Galápagos Petrel | Blue-footed Booby | Brown Pelican | Great Egret | Cattle Egret | Striated Heron | Galápagos Flycatcher | San Cristobal Mockingbird | Yellow Warbler | Woodpecker Finch | Medium Ground-Finch | Galápagos Sea Lion | Sally Lightfoot crab



Monday, Feb. 25 | Genovesa, Darwin's Cove and Prince Philip's steps

The first activity of the day was a walk at Darwin Bay. Immediately we were met by the archipelago's famously accessible wildlife. Birds, lizards, and fish all seemed to welcome our observations and photographs. Our first Marine Iguanas were here. After our short walk and talk, we donned our gear and hit the water. This group was a happy bunch of snorkelers. Ivan even had a Ring-of-Happiness and individual support for our less experienced participants. After the hour-long swim, we headed back on ship for lunch and sea kayaking and paddle boarding. Late that afternoon, after music and a siesta, we did a deep-water snorkel. Hammerhead Sharks and many of their sea companions joined us, including a baleful Purple Octopus. Back on board to change, and then back in the pangas. We climbed the Prince Philip steps to see the vast population of birds that make this remote isle famous. The target bird was the Short-eared Owl. Bobbies, gulls, frigates, doves, mockingbirds, there were a lot of birds, both species and numbers. As we walked, we learned about the Nazca Boobies' practice of NAV (non-parental visitor aggression), and we watched a juvenile spar with an NAV. The Short-eared Owl has developed a daylight hunting strategy to avoid the Galápagos Hawk. It can take on birds much bigger than itself and on Genovesa, it frequently waits in cracks to ambush incoming Storm Petrels. We spotted four of these interesting birds on our afternoon walk; one gave quite a show, looking as though he might have a pellet to expel. Nothing materialized despite a solid ten minutes of what appeared to be owl expectoration. Then it was back to the Eric for more food and libations. The very active day sent us to bed right after dinner.

Galápagos Dove | Ruddy Turnstone | Wandering Tattler | Lava Gull | Red-billed Tropicbird | Band-rumped Storm-Petrel | Wedge-Rumped Storm-Petrel | Galápagos Petrel | Magnificent Frigatebird | Great Frigatebird | Nazca Booby | Blue-footed Booby | Red-footed Booby | Brown Pelican | Yellow-crowned Night-Heron | Short-eared Owl | Galápagos Mockingbird | Large Ground-Finch | Large Cactus-Finch

Underwater: Spotted eagle ray | Blue-chinned Parrotfish | Sea Cucumbers | King Angelfish | White Sea Urchin | Pencil-spined Sea Urchin | Marine Iguana | Wrass | Barberfish | Yellowtail Surgeonfish | Gold Rim Surgeonfish | Hammerhead Shark | Manta Ray | White-tipped Reef Shark | Morrish Idol | Octopus | Spine-tailed Mobula | Diamond Stingray | Pufferfish | Blue-chinned Parrotfish | Hieroglyphic Hawkfish | Three-banded Butterflyfish | Giant Damselfish | Panama Sergeant Major | Large-banded Blenny | Calico Lizardfish | Guinea Fowl-Puffer | Grouper | Streamer Hawkfish

Tuesday, Feb. 26 | Santa Cruz Island, Black Turtle Cove, Baltra, Dragon Hill

After a sound sleep, and another long night crossing, we headed out early into Black Turtle Cove on the pangas. Here we learned about the mangroves and saw an abundance of Penguins, Turtles, and Nursery Sharks. A pair of Pacific Green Turtles obliged us with their mating practices. The Penguins swam by in formation. It seemed like they were seeking handouts. The next activity was another snorkel; the snorkels were so full of saline that further lists only contain notable animals. Midday was occupied by refueling at Baltra. The Gypsy Carpenters helped pass the time with a singalong in the lounge. That afternoon we snorkeled again and took a hike up Dragon Hill in search of Land Iguanas and Giant Tortoises. Of course, we saw both: this group had magic.

White-cheeked Pintail | Smooth-billed Ani | Black-necked Stilt | Whimbrel | Least Sandpiper | Wandering Tattler | Lesser Yellowlegs | Lava Gull | Elliot's Storm-Petrel | Blue-footed Booby | Frigatebird | Brown Pelican | Great Blue Heron | Galápagos Flycatcher | Yellow Warbler | Large Tree-Finch | Small Ground-Finch | Common Cactus-Finch | Medium Ground-Finch | Semipalmated Plover
 Underwater: Pacific Green Sea Turtles | Black-tipped Shark | Hammerhead Shark | Concentric pufferfish | Chocolate Chip Sea Star | Spiny Lobster | Blue Seastar | Pencil Sea Urchin | Sand dollar | Diamond ray



Wednesday, Feb. 27 | Fernandina Island, Punta Espinoza, Bahia Urvina

By day four we were really into the rhythm of our daily activities. Getting in and out of our wetsuits, eating great food, napping, and singing: every day was action packed. Today we arrived at the western most part of our trip. Fernandina is the youngest island in the archipelago. Our landing on the dock brought us nose to nose with marine iguanas and sea lions. Overhead we found three Galápagos Hawks. We saw the rarely seen flower of the lava cactus, and flightless Cormorants. Our afternoon hike on the edge of Isabela Island was filled with enormous Marine Iguanas, Giant Tortoise, and more Cormorants. The day's snorkels were excellent again, but it was hard to imagine better: little did we know, more was waiting. That night we had a special concert by the Eric's crew. I-love led the group in high energy songs, but Segundo moved us with his traditional ballads. Those guys can really jam. There was singing and dancing, and Maria led us in the limbo. We then collapsed into our beds with smiles again.

Galápagos Dove | Smooth-billed Ani | American Oystercatcher | Semipalmated Plover | Whimbrel | Wandering Tattler | Franklin's Gull | Lava Gull | Galápagos Penguin | Magnificent Frigatebird | Blue-footed Booby | Flightless Cormorant | Brown Pelican | Striated Heron | Galápagos Hawk | Galápagos Mockingbird | Yellow Warbler | Small Tree-Finch | Small Ground-Finch | Medium Ground-Finch | Darwin's Finches

Underwater: Mola Mola (giant sunfish) | Octopus | Pacific Green Sea Turtle | Marine Iguanas | Penguins

Thursday, Feb. 28 | Isabela Island, Elizabeth Bay, Tagus Cove, Darwin's Crater



After another fortifying breakfast, we took a panga ride along the coast of the marvelous island. The surprise was seeing the largely vegetarian Pacific Green Sea Turtle, with its jaws firmly locked on a half-eaten fish: a very large half-eaten fish. *Somebody was craving protein.* A concentric pufferfish was dining on a moth. The damp season had brought a lot of insects and the birds and fish were taking advantage. Argiope Spiders spun beautiful webs that were also seen everywhere. The morning snorkel was laden with sea life. Penguins, Cormorants, Turtles, and Iguanas in a parade amongst the permanent creatures of the deep. We learned that an animal is a land creature if it eats on land, and a marine creature if it eats in the sea. One irritable flightless Cormorant took a nip at Bobbie's right calf, leaving a small red dot: another first for our group. Really, the visual wonders of the sea made it hard to end every snorkel. Our guides frequently had to chase some of us back to the boat. That afternoon we hiked to Darwin's Crater for magnificent views of the mysterious salty water body, and the vast lava field making up the north of the island. Mockingbirds and Finches entertained us with their feather fanning mating displays. Heaps of Monarch Butterflies raised questions of migration and food sources: they do not migrate and there is milkweed on the islands. How the Monarch got to the Galapagos, is a mystery!



Brown Noddy | Galápagos Penguin | Flightless Cormorant | Brown Pelican | Galápagos Flycatcher | Galápagos Mockingbird | Small Ground-Finch | Medium Ground-Finch

Underwater: Golden eagle ray | Spotted Eagle Ray | Sea (Tree) lion | Concentric Pufferfish

So many fish. We got tired of trying to sort them all out. Heads were exploding.



Friday, Mar. 1 | Puerto Egas of Santiago, Rabida Island

At Puerto Egas, we learned about a short-lived era of human habitation that left behind a few ruins. It was the eternal story of corruption and exploitation that we hear all over the world. People were promised land that the promiser did not own: a change in government ended it all and everybody left. Today the island teems with wildlife. A group of Fur Seals were frolicking in the grottos near Darwin's toilet. We could see the different facial features between the Sea Lion and Fur Seals, even though this Fur Seal is not a true Seal. The dominant male greeted our group with a large bellow. Along the edges of a tidal pool was an American Oystercatcher with its wee



down covered hatchling no larger than an egg on legs. Sally Lightfoot Crabs added dots of red and gold on the dark sculpted rocks. Zigzag Spiders decorated trailside trees. On our morning snorkel, we spotted a huge Stone Scorpionfish and a school of Salema (I would have said numbered over 100,000 individuals). The afternoon snorkel had a Spotted Snake Eel and a Short-tooth moray eel. Later in the day, we hiked the red soil of Rabida. Before we even had our shoes changed, Burt yelled, "Flamingo" and Karina ran to see if he was kidding; he was not. For the first time in years, and only the second time ever in her 20+ year career, there was a Flamingo in the brackish water at Rabida. Oddly, it was the second time in 18 months for Burt and Susan to see a Flamingo here. Their amazing good luck continued. We got an eyeful of that calm and showy bird. It was spectacular. We all watched as it swung its improbable bill back and forth in the water, filtering out crustaceans and preening its bright pink feathers.

Red-necked Phalarope | Galapagos Martin | White-cheeked Pintail | American Flamingo | Galápagos Dove | American Oystercatcher | Semipalmated Plover | Wandering Tattler | Brown Noddy | Galápagos Penguin | Galápagos Shearwater | Magnificent Frigatebird | Nazca Booby | Blue-footed Booby | Brown Pelican | Galápagos Flycatcher | Galápagos Mockingbird | Finch

Underwater: Spotted Snake Eel | Tiger Eel Snake | Seahorse

Saturday, Mar. 2 | Highlands of Santa Cruz Island and the Darwin Center

Our tour was coming to an end and there was a kind of gentle sadness infecting us. Not only would we have to say good-bye to new friends, but all of us, crew and passengers had to bid farewell to the Eric. After nearly three decades of service, the Eric was being replaced by a new ship. We all loved this hard-working craft, and nobody wants to see it retired. Still, we had fun, and more things to see and more songs to sing. That morning we visited the Darwin Center, and Karina delighted us with a passionate presentation of the land tortoise restoration program. She explained how island by island rats were being eradicated. It was a complex process, but slowly they were notching up success. Land tortoises are breeding in the wild, for the first time in 100 years in some locations.

Then we took an hour to explore the town, and stock up on gifts for home. After lunch, we took a bus ride to the highlands and visited the Gemelos twin sinkholes. Green warbler-Finches sang for us and a Woodpecker Finch sped on past. At the working ranch, we observed the tortoises in mid-migration across a working farm. We also walked through a dark and damp lava tube. Karina explained how these tubes form when the lava cools at different rates. A cooler and harder exterior can contain a warmer flowing interior, like a straw and soda.



That night we played music and gathered ourselves for the parting.

White-cheeked Pintail | Smooth-billed Ani | Franklin's Gull | Galápagos Shearwater | Blue-footed Booby | Brown Pelican | Cattle Egret | Yellow-crowned Night-Heron | Galápagos Flycatcher | Galápagos Mockingbird | Yellow Warbler | Green Warbler-Finch | Vegetarian finch | Woodpecker finch | Small Tree-Finch | Small Ground-Finch

Sunday, Mar. 3 | Interpretive Center at San Cristobal, Departure

The final day was spent touring the exhibits at the San Cristobal Interpretive Center, or hiking up Tijeretas Hill, followed by a snack and wi-fi in town, as we waited for our flight to Quito. The hill hike rewarded us with a breeze and expansive views of Puerto Ayora and the Pacific. Our group arrived in Quito and had one last dinner together, and then it was off on our own journeys. Some headed home, others to Mindo for more birds, and others for a more expansive tour through Ecuador. It was a privilege to be in such great company. We were lucky to have a group of warm and interesting companions, guides that wanted to share their home with us, and a crew that saw to our every need.



Blue-footed Booby | Ruddy Turnstone | Franklin's Gull | Great Blue Heron | Great Egret | Yellow Warbler | San Cristobal Mockingbird | Small Ground-Finch

A big thank you to Susan Mittelstadt for providing the photos for the trip report.