

# Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

November 10 – 18, 2018 | Written by Pat Lueders



**Guide: Pat Lueders, with 11 participants: Rick, Chris, Carlotta, Dave, Ellyn, Cathie, Beverley, Jenny, Judy, Kathy and Jim**



## **Saturday, November 10 Antisana National Park Pre-Tour Extension**

After arrival last night, in Quito we enjoyed an early breakfast before meeting our local guide, Andrea. She took us to explore the high paramo, a tundra-like terrain with the stunning, snow-capped Antisana Volcano in view. After introductions, we boarded our comfortable bus and traveled through the bustling city of Quito, marveling at the mountainous landscape of this beautiful mile-high city. Andrea pointed out the significant highlights of each small town until we arrived at the wide-open habitat called the paramo. Our first stop was an observation tower on the edge of a hillside where we searched across the valley for Andean Condor, the largest flying bird in the world. We quickly found two — one tending to a brown juvenile in the nest, and the other roosting near one of many waterfalls — obviously a pair. What a thrill! Below us, in the scrub, smaller birds popped up including two Cinereous Conebills, the cute Tufted Tit-tyrant, and numerous Black Flowerpiercers. A perched Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle was spotted along the ridge of the cliff for scope views. We waited, and one of the Andean Condors flew over to the other for spectacular views of it in flight. However, the other star of this stop

was a Spectacled Bear which was spotted feeding on the hillside! We got great views of him foraging for food during our stay. A fabulous start to our trip!

We continued driving the paramo, stopping for good looks at both Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, together in a field for nice comparisons. Male and female Ecuadorian Hillstars were seen nesting in an abandoned barn nearby. Andrea had us watching, and we soon spotted two Black-faced Ibis in a field and two Andean Lapwings with them. Large numbers of Andean Gulls were flying over and sitting in the fields, as were juvenile and adult Carunculated Caracaras. We stopped at the entrance to the Antisana Visitor Center on our way to Laguna La Mica, the large lake in this National Park, at an altitude of 13,200'. Locals were fishing for trout that is stocked in the lake, and we spotted an Andean Coot, and a Silvery Grebe that was fishing and diving along the edge. We stopped many times along the drive as the clouds cleared to get photo opportunities of the impressive snow-covered Antisana Volcano.

Lunch at the local Tambo Condor Restaurant featured local cuisine and hummingbird feeders to watch as we dined. Our goal was to see the Giant Hummingbird, the largest in the world, and we weren't disappointed as one sat above and guarded a feeder while we enjoyed our lunch. Other spectacular hummingbirds seen at the feeders included the Black-tailed Trainbearer, the Shining Sunbeam, the Great Sapphirewing, and the Sparkling Violetear. Wow!

We returned to our comfortable hotel, enjoyed a delicious welcoming meal, and shared the excitement of our first day in this beautiful area of South America.



## **Sunday, November 11 Flight to Galápagos & the Galápagos Cruise Begins**

After another delicious breakfast, we departed from the new Quito International Airport, making a short stop in Guayaquil. The clouds cleared as we approached the Galápagos Islands and landed on San Cristóbal. We were met and welcomed by our two National Park guides for the week, Fabricio and Yvone. After a quick visit to our ship, we returned to the island to visit the National Park and walk the trails to Frigatebird Hill. We found two of our first Darwin Finches, the Small and Medium Ground-Finch, and two San Cristóbal



Mockingbirds feeding in flowering trees around the visitor's center. Lava Lizards and the cute Galápagos Flycatcher were seen at close range during the walk.

We returned to our ship to unpack, enjoyed our captain's welcome cocktail party, and sampled the first of the many delicious meals we enjoyed during our time aboard.



## **Monday, November 12 San Cristóbal, Wizard Hill & Punta Pitt**

After our daily musical wake-up call and a delicious breakfast, we were fitted with our wetsuits and snorkeling gear. Kayaking and snorkeling were on the schedule this morning, as was a panga ride to a cave called "The Cathedral." Those who planned to snorkel tested their gear at the beautiful coral sand beach. We spotted American Oystercatchers, Great Blue Heron, Whimbrel, Wandering Tattler, and a Lava Heron on the volcanic rocks; Sea Lions and Marine Iguanas were loafing on the beach. We also got closer views of two San Cristóbal Mockingbirds.

After lunch, we traveled to Punta Pitt at the northeastern tip of San Cristóbal to hike near the colony of nesting Red-footed Boobies. We spotted immature Red-footed Boobies flying and sitting on the water near the coast as we returned to the port. Throughout our journey, we saw many Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies, Brown Pelicans, Elliot's Storm-Petrels, Galápagos Shearwaters, Red-necked Phalaropes, and Magnificent Frigatebirds feeding over the ocean.

## **Tuesday, November 13 Española, Punta Suárez, Gardner Beach**

We awoke in the bay of Punta Suárez, off the southernmost island of Española, where we witnessed the highest rate of endemic species in Galápagos. We disembarked the pangas on the point and immediately spotted a perched Galápagos Hawk atop the lighthouse. Below him were two Española Mockingbirds awaiting our arrival. We wove our way through the loafing Sea Lions and spotted our first of many, juvenile, Waved Albatross along the trail. We continued, carefully skirting around him so he wouldn't be disturbed, and found a pair of adults



clacking their bills together in the traditional mating ritual. Masked Boobies were also nesting on the island, and we observed one carefully turning its egg. The strikingly beautiful Galápagos Dove was seen walking near the trail. Fabricio spotted the Galapagos Hawk's nest that contains a juvenile. A close-by adult buzzed over his head, fearing we were too close to its nest. Española Lava Lizards and Marine Iguanas weaved amongst the rocks. A pair of small, Gray Warbler-Finches with their warbler-feeding behavior, was seen low at close range. Both guides were excited to find a large male Galapagos Fur Seal loafing on the rocks near the shore, their first of this species on Española. Being this close to nature, without disturbing it, was an experience we will never forget! Our last stop this morning was at the cliffs to view the explosions of the blowhole below us.

After lunch, many snorkeled or kayaked at Gardner Bay or walked the white coral beach. The trails of Pacific Green Turtles to lay their eggs could be seen on the sand, and many were spotted in the shallow surf waiting to come ashore to lay their eggs. After cocktail hour and a delicious dinner, we reviewed our exciting day while doing our daily checklist.



**Wednesday, November 14**

**Floreana, Punta Cormorant, Champion Island, Post Office Bay**

Our wet landing from the pangas on the green-sand beach at Punta Cormorant of Floreana was smooth. This was an exciting walk to a brackish inland lake where American Flamingos roost and feed. We stopped on the edge of the lake and found feeding shorebirds including Western, Least, and Semipalmated Sandpipers, and Semipalmated Plovers. Fabricio pointed out a newly arrived Chilean Flamingo, larger and pinker than the Americans, standing in the shallow water. A group of flamingos, together on a sand bar, included a few white juveniles and a flock of White-cheeked Pintails near them. While awaiting the return of the panga, we were surprised by the arrival of two Floreana (Charles) Mockingbirds in the brush along the shore — our third of the four species of mockingbirds in the Galápagos. We enjoyed our daily view of the Galápagos Yellow Warbler, a near endemic subspecies with an orange cap similar to the Mangrove Warbler.

After lunch, we had a wet landing at Champion Island to snorkel or walk the beach. We spotted our first Galápagos Penguins swimming rapidly in the shallow waters chasing fish. Our only Yellow-crowned Night Heron of the trip blended in with the volcanic rock on the beach. On the panga ride, two more penguins were loafing on the rocks for good photos. In a shallow lagoon, a school of nine White-tipped Sharks were close enough to touch (but we didn't)! Blue-footed Boobies were sitting on the rocks for our first good views of their feet.

In the afternoon, we visited Post Office Bay, one of the most famous sites in the Galápagos, where a post barrel was erected and put into use in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century by English whaling vessels. We sorted through the postcards looking for ones close to our homes to deliver, and we left ours for future visitors. Fun!



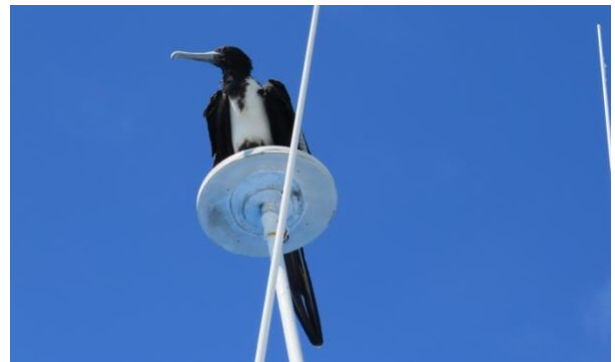
**Thursday, November 15 Santa Cruz Island, Highlands' Twin Craters, Charles Darwin Research Center**

We awoke today in the busy Santa Cruz Island harbor of Puerto Ayora, the main port city of the islands. We motored in mist and light rain through town to the highlands of the island — a very different natural history excursion in lush forests — to visit the Twin Craters. Our goal was to see the Woodpecker Finch, but we first found a Green Warbler-Finch feeding a juvenile. Our guide, Yvone, heard a Woodpecker Finch, and we quickly

found one moving along a thick branch, investigating crevices in the bark. We watched this individual, and others, hoping to see one use a twig as a tool to extract an insect.

Our next destination was a Giant Tortoise farm, Manzanillo, where the tortoises can be seen in the wild. Because of the rain, there were puddles in the dirt road, and it was lined with many tortoises enjoying the moisture. Our bus weaved carefully around them to reach the farm. We donned rubber boots because of the mud, and walked the trails of the farm. The finches were also enjoying the puddles, and we found many on the ground, for comparisons of size and bills, including Large, Medium, and Small Tree-Finch, and Large, Medium, and Small Ground-Finch. A Galápagos Mockingbird posed on a rock, and this sighting completed our goal of seeing all four of the mockingbirds on the islands. A Common Gallinule was near the pond that included bathing tortoises and White-cheeked Pintails. On our departure, as we waited for two huge tortoises to cross the road, we found three Smooth-billed Ani in nearby bushes.

Our last stop on Santa Cruz was the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora to study the science of the reintroduction of the tortoises. As we walked to the center, we spotted a Common Cactus-Finch perched at the top of a cactus! During a visit to a local café, we got to experience the annual celebration of the local Salasaca culture, featuring a colorful parade of floats and dancing children. What a treat!



## Friday, November 16 Bartolomé & Black Turtle Cove

Today we walked the Summit Trail, a series of flights of wooden steps to view Pinnacle Rock. This is the classic beauty spot of the Galápagos — the eroded remains of a tuff cone, a small submerged crater. This was the perfect spot for a group picture! As we awaited the arrival of the pangas, a Lava Gull, the most rare gull in the world, was spotted on the rocks.

In the afternoon, we took panga rides through the mangroves of Black Turtle Cove to view the nature of this habitat in shallow lagoons. We saw additional Pacific Green Turtles and two Hawksbill Turtles, White-tipped

Sharks, Hammerhead Shark, Diamond Stingrays, and perched Lava Herons. The serenity of this sheltered habitat, and the close views of nature it provided, was breathtaking!



### **Saturday, November 17 South Plaza Island & North Seymour**

We returned to the north of Santa Cruz Island to visit South Plaza, one of the two Plaza Islands, formed from uplifted marine lava. On this island walk we found both Land and Marine Iguanas and occasional hybrids of the two. Beach masters protected their Sea Lion herds, Swallow-tailed Gulls were in pairs preparing to nest, and Red-billed Tropicbirds circled the shore. Our guides were very excited to find their first Kelp Gull of the season, an early arrival. Common Cactus-Finches were numerous on the Prickly Pear Cactus, and the Galápagos Carpetweed that covers the island was blooming a brilliant red-orange.

In the afternoon we sailed to North Seymour, a low island consisting of uplifted submarine lava. This was the last snorkeling event of the trip accompanied by an unusual, early evening walk on the island. Our first Great Frigatebirds were spotted soaring over the cliffs. Nesting Magnificent and Great Frigatebirds cover the island, with many adults feeding juveniles by regurgitating into their throats. Blue-footed Boobies were paired and exhibited their mating dance. What a wonderful way to spend our last afternoon with the nature of the Galápagos!

On our final evening, the staff of the *Letty* joined us for champagne toasts to celebrate this wonderful adventure we had shared. We enjoyed the last of the chef's fabulous dinners, and we shared memories, pictures, and

addresses with our fellow travelers. We all agreed that this exceptional Galápagos experience will remain in our hearts and minds for many years to come!

## **Sunday, November 18 Return to San Cristóbal, Departure to Quito**

Our journey had come to an end, and we returned to Quito this afternoon, many then on to their homes in the U.S., while some continued exploring the Mindo area of Ecuador. There was time for souvenir shopping in the town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno before leaving for the airport, and we said our heartfelt farewells at the Quito airport to those with whom we had shared this memorable adventure.

## **Mindo Area Post-Tour Extension**

### **Sunday, November 18 Evening in Quito**

Those of us that remained in Ecuador to bird the Mindo area returned to our local Quito hotel to enjoy another delicious meal and spend a restful evening anticipating our upcoming adventure.



### **Monday, November 19 Yanacocha Reserve, Tandayapa Road, Nanegalito**

We traveled north through the city of Quito heading toward the renowned Yanacocha Reserve, high in the Ecuadorian cloud forest. We spent the morning walking the trails and watching the feeders. One bird we were keen to see at this high altitude location was the Sword-billed Hummingbird. We weren't disappointed as we spotted this hummingbird — the only bird that has a bill longer than its body — hovering at a feeder. We found eight, high-elevation hummingbirds coming to the feeders, as well as, the colorful Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager, a pair of Andean Guans, and Gray-browed and Yellow-breasted Brushfinches.

After a delicious lunch prepared by an indigenous family, we drove to Nanegalito via the Tandayapa Road, spotting a nesting Burrowing Owl, a perched Red-crested Cotinga, and Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant. We arrived at a new restaurant in Nanegalito that had numerous feeders and saw eight new, lower-altitude hummingbirds,



in addition to male and female Red-headed Barbets, our only migrant Summer Tanager, and a Swallow Tanager. What an exciting start to our extension!

We arrived at the lovely Sachatamia Lodge, our home for the next three days, to enjoy dinner and await tomorrow with great anticipation.



## **Tuesday, November 20**

### **Birding at the Farm of Angel Paz, San Tadeo, Mindo Area**

We left our lodge very early this morning to visit the farm of Angel Paz, famous for being the home of an Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek and a number of antpittas, including the elusive Giant Antpitta. We quietly entered the hide and immediately heard the distinctive vocalizations of at least nine Cock-of-the-rock males, “serenading” the females. As it got lighter, we could see the vivid red males moving around in the understory, some coming close enough for photos. Wow, what an experience! We traveled with Angel and his son, stopping for views of the Giant Antpitta, Dark-backed Wood-Quail, Moustached, Chestnut-crowned, Yellow-breasted, and Ochre-breasted Antpittas. It was such a rare occurrence to see all five antpittas that they took a picture of the group holding up five fingers in celebration!

Before lunch, we visited the San Tadeo feeders to see five new hummingbird species, and then we spent the afternoon driving and walking the Mindo Valley for the specific species found in this habitat. We marveled at the beauty of this valley and the large number of species we found.



## **Wednesday, November 21 Rio Silanche Bird Sanctuary & Milpe Road**

We departed this morning while it was still dark and traveled through intense fog to reach the lower elevation reserves of Silanche and Milpe where we found — many seen from the Silanche observation tower — a number of Chocó Region endemic birds including Chocó Toucan, Chocó Tyrannulet, and Black-faced Dacnis. Traveling along the road to the sanctuary, we were treated to three of one of the most sought after species of the trip, Sunbittern, seen wading in the river.

After lunch, we drove and walked the Milpe Road, adding 29 new species. What a successful day we experienced in this unique region of Ecuador!



## **Thursday, November 22 Sachatamia Lodge Hide, Bellavista Cloud Forest, Alambi Cloud Forest Hummingbird Reserve**

Our last day began before dawn in a hide at our lodge, built by our guide, Xavier. A white sheet was hung at sunset with a light on it to attract moths, and we saw many difficult species at close range coming in to feed on them, including four species of woodcreepers, foilage-gleaners, treehunters, and spinetails. It was overwhelming, and so exciting to compare the field marks of these species at such close range.

We traveled to Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve, a private 1,000 acre nature reserve located at 7,000' in the cloud forest. We walked a beautiful road with breathtaking views of the valley below the clouds, finding both quetzals and a mixed, feeding flock of rarer tanagers including Blue-capped, Beryl-spangled, Metallic-green, and Golden.

Lunch was enjoyed at the Alambi Cloud Forest Hummingbird Reserve, and we recognized some of the 15 species of hummingbirds and added many new ones, including the Violet-bellied, a life bird even for our local guide!

Sadly, this was our last night. During dinner at our hotel in Quito, we agreed that we had enjoyed a memorable introduction to the birds of Ecuador, and we planned to return soon to see many more of this wonderful country's 1,800 species.