

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

November 10 – 17, 2019 | Written by Dan Donaldson



With Guide Dan Donaldson, and participants Ed, Sil, Becky, Julianne, Nancy, Catherine, Cynthia, Jean, Kathy, John, Ram, Sudha, Deb, Jenise, Brenda, Jim, Thomas, and Carolyn.





Sat., Nov. 9 Antisana National Park Pre-Tour Extension

Most of our group arrived the night before and enjoyed a group dinner together. The first morning, an early buffet was set up for us so we could meet our local guide Marcello at 7:00 a.m. for our early departure for Antisana. We headed to explore the High Paramo, a unique grasslands habitat found between 10,000 feet (tree line) and 16,000 feet (permanent snow line) occurring only in the Andes mountain range. Our group of 16 boarded a comfortable bus and began our journey high into the Andes. Heading to Antisana, we drove through the busy city of Quito, with a population of over 2 million residents. It sits at over 9,000 feet and is bordered to the east and west by mountain ranges that rise to 15,000 feet. Our drive climbed through the outskirts of Quito, through small villages and (amazing) agriculture fields on the steep terrain and at such high altitudes. Potatoes and beans are the most prevalent crop and the cattle pastures extend skyward on the steepest of slopes. Our first birding stop was at a local restaurant, Tambo Condor, for a quick break and to check out the valley it overlooks. Here we quickly observed our first hummingbirds of the trip. Shining Sunbeam, Black-tailed Trainbearer, and Sparkling Violetear were patrolling feeders and Eared Dove picked at the earth below. In the fields around the restaurant, we observed numbers of Great Thrush. A good-sized flock of Andean Gulls flew by us repeatedly, between the nearby lake and the ridgeline above us. This was also the location where we got our first looks at the quest bird of this trip, the Andean Condor, the world's largest flying bird. Two were seen in the distance here. We boarded our bus to get to our next location where we could have much better views.

A short drive up the road brought us to Reserva Antisanilla-Mirador, with a viewing platform overlooking a grassy meadow, with views across the valley to the cliffs where condors nest and roost. Here in the meadows, we had wonderful looks at a wide variety of small grassland birds and hummingbirds including Tyrian Metaltail, Great Sapphirewing, Giant Hummingbird, Paramo Sedge Wren, Yellow-breasted Brushfinch, and Plain-colored Seedeaters. Four Andean Condors were present here and we not only observed them roosting across the valley, but also enjoyed several "low and close" flybys. We also got our first look at Black-chested Buzzard Eagle at this location.

Driving higher into the paramo, we made many stops along the roadway to scan the open grasslands and creek valleys. We encountered an open field that had 6 Condors loitering on the ground, and sometimes seemingly

playing with each other. Most of them were juveniles and several of them were tagged with patagial (wing) tags. Along this drive that took us quite close to the Antisana Volcano, we passed wet meadows and valleys and took stops to view more Andean Gulls, a Great-horned Owl, Ecuadorian Hillstars, both Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Plain-capped Ground, and Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, and had wonderful looks at 3 Carunculated Caracaras. Our turnaround spot for the day was Laguna de Mica, a beautiful high-mountain lake that serves as a drinking water source for the city of Quito. This was our chance to spot some waterfowl on this trip, and we sure did. A short hike down a footpath from the parking lot allowed for better views of the lake and we spotted Andean Teal, Andean Duck, Silvery Grebe, and Slate-colored Coot. On the drive back down from Laguna de Mica, we were able to locate Black-faced Ibis at a distance—a little too far for great pictures, but we had good looks at them through our spotting scopes.

We returned to Tambo Condor Restaurant for a wonderful Ecuadorian lunch and to watch the hummingbird feeders just as it started to rain in earnest. From the deck, we got wonderful views and photos of hummingbirds, but also added a few new species for the day—Golden Grosbeak, Cinereous Conebill, Hooded Siskin, Black Vultures, and a mob of Black Flowerpiercers.





We returned to the San Jose de Puenbo, our wonderful home base hotel, met up with a couple more arrivals, and enjoyed a delicious meal, shared our favorite parts of the day, and got to know each other better. We headed to bed knowing that by this time tomorrow, we'll be in the Galapagos.

Sun., Nov. 10 Flight to Galapagos | Galapagos Cruise

Today was a travel day, but it was a travel day to the Galapagos, so it was filled with excitement and good spirits! We enjoyed another delicious breakfast at San Jose and departed early for the airport. From Quito, our flight made a quick stop in the Pacific port-town of Guayaquil where we met two more of our trip participants and took off for our 2-hour flight to the Islands. Landing on San Cristobal, we were welcomed by local dancers in traditional dress who danced while we worked our way through customs. After customs, we were quickly met by our local guides for the week, Antonio and Gustavo, who helped us with transportation to our ship, the Letty, where we had a quick introduction, lunch and cabin assignments.

In the afternoon, we returned to the island to visit the National Park Visitor Center and bird the trails in the Frigatebird Hill area. The center's trails gave us a good introduction to the terrain and habitats we will explore in the days ahead. San Cristobal Mockingbirds were heard and seen along the trails, San Cristobal Lava Lizards basked along the trails and we got our first look at Swallow-tailed Gull on the cliffs along Frigatebird Hill. We also were treated to our first experience of Garua, the overcast and misty conditions that occur during the rainy season. Upon returning to the harbor for transport back to our ship, we were greeted by Sea Lions on the piers, Blue-footed Boobies diving for fish, Franklin's Gull (rare this time of year), Elliot's Storm-Petrels, Brown Pelicans, and what appeared to be a Red Bat flying just off the pier. We returned to our ship by dingy (panga), enjoyed a welcome cocktail with the captain and crew, and were treated to our first dinner on board the Letty.





Mon., Nov. 11 Isla San Cristobal | Wizard Hill | Punta Pitt

Our first morning in the Galapagos! We awoke to music for our wake-up call over the PA system at 7:00 a.m. A peek out our windows revealed that we were anchored in a beautiful coral beach bay, surrounded by towering cliffs. After a full breakfast buffet, we met on the observation deck to get outfitted for our assigned snorkeling gear for the week. Once fitted, we boarded our pangas for a trip into the Cathedral, a volcanic cave system that is exposed to the ocean. Here we got our first looks at some of the native wildlife—Sally Lightfoot crabs and Sea anemones were clinging to the wet walls, and Brown Pelican were nesting on the few flat ledges on the cliffs.

After motoring along the Cathedral and nearby cliff formations, we had a wet beach landing and spent the morning trying out our snorkeling gear in the shallows and exploring the beach and rocky areas along the shoreline. This beach provided our first up-close encounters with Sea Lion and Marine Iguana. Our group also found and photographed Galapagos Tortoise tracks along the beach. It wasn't until the visit was nearly over that our guides heard of our discovery and stopped everything to go and see them for themselves. The guides indicated that tortoises were extirpated on this island and were reintroduced many years ago. This was the first time either guide had seen evidence of them on this beach. Fun to see them excited!

On the beach were great opportunities to bird and we spotted Whimbrel, Great Blue Heron (Galapagos subspecies), Least Sandpiper, Wandering Tattler, and Lava (Striated) Heron. Frigatebirds and Pelicans were ever present, seemingly effortlessly gliding by in the skies above. Pairs of San Cristobal Mockingbird were also found along the trails along the bluffs.

After lunch, we enjoyed what would be our daily afternoon siesta and this day it happened as we motored to Punta Pitt. At Punta Pitt, we hiked into the hills where the trail took us close to a Red-footed Booby colony. We spotted Blue-footed and Nazca Booby as well, including chicks that seemed as amused with us as we were with them. The views from the cliffs offered spectacular vistas of the open Pacific to the east. From this vantage point, we observed Manta Ray jumping from the water and several schools of fish being fed on by game fish from below and birds from above. Other birds seen while hiking here were Galapagos Dove, another Darwin Finch, and the Common Cactus Finch.

Tues., Nov. 12 Isla Espanola | Punta Suarez | Gardner Beach

Overnight we motored south to Espanola Island and woke up in the bay of Punta Suarez. Espanola was our southernmost destination on this trip. After breakfast, we boarded our pangas and headed to the rocky shore



where we were greeted by Ruddy Turnstone picking through algae and tide pools. This was a dry landing today but discovered that our dock was guarded by a large male Marine Iguana in full green and red breeding colors. Stepping carefully past him, we continued along the beach and were immediately greeted by another mockingbird species, the Espanola Mockingbird. This pair of mockingbirds seemed at home near the beach and we observed them hanging by the newly born sea lions, searching for food—either Espanola Lava Lizards or whatever insects the sea lions attract.

The rocky dunes here were heavily vegetated and we encountered an obstacle course of Marine Iguanas laying in the pathway as the trail has some of the only available sunlight. Marine Iguanas feed underwater for up to 15 minutes before having to return to land to bask in the sun for hours to get their body temperature back up. The dunes near the edge of the island gave way to volcanic bedrock and even more iguanas that we had to navigate past. Further down the trail, we encountered a pair of Waved Albatross in courtship. We are amazed and stopped to watch watching them purr, squeal and display, photographing their every move. We also observed our first Gray Warbler-Finch in this area.

We emerged from the scrub forest toward the edge of the island, where towering cliffs provide uplift for passing Waved Albatross and Red-billed Tropicbird. Offshore flocks of Audubon's Shearwater formed large rafts looking like seafoam in the waves. We also watched close nesting and courtship activities of Nazca Boobies on the rocky cliffs and ledges, with males pointing their beaks to the sky while whistling.



A Galapagos Hawk spotted nearby was watching the same cliffs as we were in hopes of spotting an unlucky shearwater or careless lava lizard. We returned to our pangas and our ship for a well-deserved lunch and siesta. Frigatebirds soared over our boat most the afternoon while we motored on to Gardner Bay.

In the afternoon, our well-rested group was definitely up for snorkeling in Gardner Bay and exploring its white sand beaches on foot. Green Sea Turtles use this location for nesting, and many were seen in the shallows as they wait for nightfall before coming ashore to lay their eggs. A whale skeleton was found in the dunes and more Espanola Mockingbirds followed our every move, picking at our shoelaces as we walked the beach. We also watched a Galapagos Hawk catch a lava lizard nearby which gave us wonderful photo opportunities as it roosted in a nearby tree to eat it. We returned to our ship, enjoyed another fine dinner, and reviewed the highlights of the day and the day ahead, heading for the Island of Floreana.

Wed., Nov. 13 Isla Floreana | Punta Cormorant | Champion Island | Post Office Bay

This morning, we visited Punta Cormorant, a green sand beach comprised of the tiny gemstones of Olivine that were formed in a nearby dormant and eroding volcanic cone. Walking along the water's edge at the beach, we observed more Green Sea Turtles swimming in the shallows, but this time, it was the hundreds of Marbled Ray gathering in the incoming waves along the shoreline that grabbed our attention. Blue-footed Booby were working these shallows as well and were diving into the surf not far from where we stood.

Next, we hiked into the Flamingo Lagoon, a saline barrier pond where Galapagos Flamingo are regularly seen. We were not disappointed as we observed several small groups, some exhibiting courtship behavior involving coordinated strutting, and wing flapping. As we walked around the pond, we also spotted Black-necked Stilt, White-cheeked Pintail, Smooth Billed Ani (introduced), and Short-billed Dowitcher. A short hike over the first hill revealed another secluded bay and Flour Beach where we found Yellow-crowned Night-Heron searching for young crabs. We also got our first looks at a pair of Galapagos Penguin swimming just offshore.

After lunch and siesta, we took a panga tour around the rocky edge of Post Office Bay with views of a forest of tree like forms of Opuntia cacti. Many Sea Lion females had newborn pups, resting and feeding along the rocky edges of the bay, too. Some pups even had placentas still attached! Along the way, we observed young White-tipped Sharks, many Green sea turtles and a pair of Galapagos Penguins.



We ended this excursion at Post Office Bay, the location of a makeshift message center dating from the whaling days of the 1800's. This tradition of passing ships entering the islands where they would stop for water, provisions (tortoises) and leave messages in a barrel. Crews of ships heading back to Europe would also stop for water and provisions and pick up messages to be delivered back in their home ports. This continues today! We all left a few post cards and also picked out some for delivery when we get back home. The tradition is that messages get delivered by hand and not put through the post.

Thurs., Nov. 14 Isla Santa Cruz | Giant Tortoise Day! | Los Gemelos, Rancho El Chato | Charles Darwin Research Center



We awakened anchored in Puerto Ayora harbor, a busy commerce center in the islands. The harbor was alive with boats and ships of all sizes with water taxis and pangas busily making trips for supplies and shuttling passengers. We also were transported to the docks by our pangas and when onshore, we boarded a small bus for transport up into the mountains of Santa Cruz. Our first stop was at Los Gemelos or Twin Craters, the site of two very large lava tubes that had collapsed and are now forested. This forested habitat of the highlands was new to us and birded the area and located both Green Warbler-Finch and Large Ground-Finch. We put in a long effort to spot a Woodpecker Finch after hearing one, but we were not able to locate them at this site.

Driving the highway toward Reserva El Chato, a wild tortoise wildlife sanctuary and ranch, we observed our first and many



tortoises in the yards and pastures of homes and farms. The giant tortoises here graze much like cattle and move up and down the slopes of the volcanic mountains with the seasons. El Chato Ranch provided us up close opportunities to observe and photograph wild tortoises roaming in a protected environment. Cattle Egrets also massed around these tortoises for the same reason they associate with cattle--they are opportunistic feeders and pounce on any small prey that tortoises disturb. As we hiked on the ranch, we got to explore a lava tube, a tunnel of cooled, hardened lava, an interesting geologic feature that was an added bonus on our visit to El Chato Ranch.

Back on the boat for lunch and a siesta...

Our last stop of the day was to explore the Charles Darwin Research Station, a non-profit organization dedicated to scientific research to ensure the conservation of the environment and biodiversity in the Galapagos Archipelago. Partnering with the Galapagos National Park, they lead a successful breeding program for giant tortoises and have been instrumental in recovering different island species of Tortoises. We viewed tortoises of every size, from ping-pong ball sized babies, to 600-pound breeding adults in their breeding center. We also got to view an exhibit housing the now deceased (and recently returned to the islands after a stint at the American Museum of Natural History where he was taxidermied!) famous Lonesome George, the last of the Pinta Island Giant Tortoises. We also were excited to view the more recently famous Diego. Diego is the 100-year-old tortoise who was returned from the San Diego Zoo to help with the genetic diversity of the breeding program. We now know that Diego is scheduled to be released back into the wild in 2020!

After visiting the Charles Darwin Research Station, we had a little more than an hour on our own to explore and experience the town of Puerto Ayora for shopping, to enjoy local restaurants, coffee shops and bars and were even lucky enough to witness a cultural parade with floats and dancing children representing the various regions of Ecuador. We returned to the ship for cocktail hour, another great dinner and once again at the end of the day shared the day's experiences in the lounge area.

Fri., Nov. 15 Isla Bartolomé | Isla Batra | Black Turtle Cove

Motoring through the night, we awakened at the Island of Bartolomé. Bartolomé is a much younger and harsher island that has little vegetation on it and as a result, little terrestrial life. We did however observe large Painted



Locusts—maybe blown in from Isla Santa Cruz? Once they're on Bartolomé, they are not likely to survive and will likely weaken and fall prey to birds and lava lizards. On Bartolomé, the trails are both boardwalks and wooden staircases, so the fragile soils of the island are not disturbed by tracking of visitors. It was quite a steep hike up the hill, so we took our time climbing up the Summit Trail to Pinnacle Rock. It was definitely worth the hike as the lookout afforded one of the most famous and beautiful views in the Galapagos. From the summit, we viewed many volcanic cones and the beautiful bay. Our ship anchored far below in the bay made this the perfect spot for our official group photo for the trip.

In the afternoon, we snorkeled off a submerged wall where all the colorful little fish we'd been seeing on other snorkeling adventures in the Galapagos were now much larger and more brilliant. Sea Lions were also in this area and we snorkeled with several juvenile Red-billed Tropicbirds called overhead. We were also fortunate enough to have a couple Galapagos Penguin hunting for fish in the same area we were snorkeling. Seemingly unaware of our presence, they swam in and out of us chasing small schools of fish, providing for some wonderful video footage. We returned to the ship for our post-snorkel refreshments, then boarded our pangas again for a late afternoon tour through Black Turtle Cove, a mangrove forested backwater area that is as nursery for sharks and resting area for sea turtles. Once in the lagoon, we observed many sea turtles either breeding in open water or resting in the shallows. Our guides explained that the turtles wedge themselves in the mangrove roots so they can rest while being held in place. As we floated along, we viewed young Hammer-head Sharks, Spotted Eagle Rays, young Black-tipped Reef Sharks and more. The birding was also great from our pangas and we spotted American Oystercatcher, Lava Gull (the rarest gull in the world), Brown Noddy, Frigatebird, Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies, Galapagos Mockingbird, and the commonly seen Yellow Warbler. The late day setting sun afforded dramatic views of the open skies, mangrove lined lagoon and open ocean as we returned to our ship.



Sat., Nov. 16 Isla South Plaza | Isla North Seymour

Overnight, we motored to South Plaza Island with its many nearby reefs and high cliffs for nesting seabirds. We started our morning out with a dry landing and hiked up to the cliff areas of the island. The bluffs over the ocean provide nesting cavities for thousands of Galapagos Shearwater and Brown Noddies. As we stopped along the bluff to view these colonies, we watched wave after wave of shearwaters fly in, carefully maneuvering to land in the crevasses in the rocks. We observed more nesting Nazca Booby, Lava Gull, and many nesting Swallow-tailed Gull. This island is also home to a large population of beautiful Galapagos Land Iguana, distant relatives of the Marine Iguana. These large golden iguanas feed almost exclusively on Opuntia cactus and we observed many feeding on the occasional cactus pad that had fallen to the ground. Conservation efforts to protect Opuntia cacti are underway and protecting the cacti will help ultimately help Land Iguanas as this is their main food source. We observed and photographed many Land Iguana at close range on this visit. Hybrids of Land Iguana and Marine Iguana also reside on this island.

During lunch, we sailed to the Island of North Seymour. On arrival, we snorkeled in deep water areas along the wall of the island in hopes of seeing larger sharks and more sea turtles. We did find a couple sleeping nurse sharks, smaller eels, Halibut, and more larger versions of the same species we've been finding on other snorkeling expeditions.

This flat and low-lying island is nearly completely vegetated with low brush, making it a perfect nesting location for both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds. We visited this island in the late afternoon and observed many hundred nesting Frigatebirds and Blue-footed Booby. Toward the end of daylight, the wildlife seemed to be settling down and the photography conditions were perfect. We walked by nesting Frigatebirds in various phases of nesting, from ones with just starting in courtship with breeding displays to full sized young who were nearly ready to leave their nests. We saw many male Frigatebirds with their brilliant red throat balloons (gular sacs) fully inflated in flight overhead while others were on their nest shaking their balloons at passing females. We also were able to watch the setting sun on North Seymour Island, getting our last wildlife photos of the trip in the glowing, golden Galapagos light. Upon returning to the Letty, the Captain and crew of the ship joined us for farewell cocktails before our last chef prepared dinner. After our fabulous last dinner aboard, our group gathered in the lounge one last time to celebrate our week and go through our trip lists of birds, mammals, fish and reptiles and review our disembarking instructions with the crew. Though weary from a long week of adventures, we hung around well into the night to share photos and exchange contact information with our



fellow travelers. We all agreed that this was the perfect way to experience the Galapagos! Our small boat, small group size, and wonderful local guides made this an experience we will all remember and recommend for years.

Sun., Nov. 17 Return to Isle San Cristobal | Departure to Quito

Today marked the end of our Galapagos journey and we headed back to Quito for departures home or on to the next location! A few of us continued our Ecuador experience with an additional trip to the Mindo region of Ecuador. Before leaving the Galapagos, we had time for a quick bite to eat and one more chance for some souvenir shopping in the small town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, before leaving for the airport. At the airport, we said our goodbyes to our local guides Antonio and Gustavo and boarded our plane back to Quito for our connecting flights home or our next adventure.

Photo Credits:

All photos for the trip report provided by Dan and Rebecca Donaldson.