

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 4 – 11, 2018 | Written by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt

Hosted by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt of the *Gypsy Carpenters*, with participants Susan, William, Amy, Edwin, Robert, Sue, Clay, Brian, and Fiona



Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 4 – 11, 2018 | Written by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt

Sun., Feb. 4

The week began with a fish dinner on Saturday night, followed by Amy's birthday cake at Puembo Birding Gardens. The next morning (Sunday) we were all up and running (literally — Bob chased down our bus); we arrived at the airport and were met by our EcoVentura representative who was ready and waiting, sweeping us through all the preliminaries with alacrity. Susan (after a bout with tourista), was wheeled about in a wheelchair. Sue and Clay were met at the airport. We all made the flight, and Roberto joined us in Guayaquil. Go team!

We arrived in San Cristobal on schedule and were ferried to the boat. The Naturalist Journeys' group met six new friends on board and we seamlessly merged into one group of friendly and excited participants. Susan passed out the species checklists and shared the extras with the other couples. We had our boarding briefing and then enjoyed the first of a continuous string of fine meals. After lunch there was a practice emergency drill.

The afternoon was the first snorkeling of the trip. Burt helped the newbies figure out the mask and snorkel and generally relax in the water. Fiona saw her first sea turtle. Highlights of the outing were the Pacific Green Sea Turtle, the Blue-footed Booby, Sea Lions, and Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds. That night, an exhausted group headed to bed early. No music was played.

Mon., Feb. 5

By this morning we were all under the Galápagos' magic spell. We started with a wet landing at Cerro Brujo and a beach walk. Our guides Cecibel and Giancarlo set us free to explore a lovely stretch of soft sandy shoreline. We walked in sight of Leon Dormido (Kicker Rock). We saw our first Marine Iguanas and Lava Lizards. The San Cristobal Mockingbird, a warbler-finch, and the velvety gray Lava Gull were also spotted. Elliot's Storm-Petrels danced on the water behind the *Letty*, too.

The late morning was spent snorkeling nearby. Words fail, however, the snorkeling never failed to impress.

After lunch we did a hike at Punta Pitt. Begging Blue-footed Booby babies. Dancing Blue-footed Boobies. Egg sitting Blue-footed Boobies. Blue-footed Boobies were looking good at Punta Pitt.

Highlights of the day: All three species of boobies (Red-footed, Blue-footed, and Nazca) were seen. We also enjoyed close up swoops of the nocturnal Swallow-tailed Gull and the Red-billed Tropicbird. Fiona was bitten by the bird listing craze and it was revealed that her significant other is an eBird administrator. Fiona spotted a pair of American Oystercatchers.

Tues., Feb. 6

Day three found us walking at Punta Suarez on Espanola and sea kayaking, snorkeling, and hiking along Gardener Bay. It was a jam-packed day. On our hike we saw our only Waved Albatross; unfortunately it was dead. Giancarlo explained that the largely unfilled niche of carrion eaters in the Islands was why skeletons and mummified remains were so plentiful. On the live side, we saw our first Nazca Boobies, a snake, and more Sea Lions and Marine Iguanas. The Marine Iguanas were especially colorful this time of year. Our boating expedition was a delight. Calm seas, clear water, balmy temperatures. What else could you ask for? Susan and Fiona went out together while Burt boated with Brian. Roberto did the SUP and all the other couples were paired with their mates. Nobody was thrown overboard.

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 4 – 11, 2018 | Written by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt

During the snorkel we saw a massive ball of creole fish. A shimmering blue delight.

That night Susan ate her first solid food and the instruments and singers came together and got the trip groove going. Brian, Burt, Susan, Fiona, and Roberto got down. The Capitan danced with Sue to *Love Potion #9* while Claudia drove the ship. Edwin won the award for knowing all the words to all the songs.

The day's highlights: Galápagos Mockingbird, a warbler-finch, Wandering Tattler, and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

Wed., Feb. 7

On our fourth day we are getting the hang of this. Our ship was anchored just off Floreana. Cecibel had us getting up early to avoid the heat. The early wakeup call had the added benefit of avoiding other groups. We'd hardly crossed paths with other visitors. Despite our good natured grumbles about the 6:00 AM alarms, we were happy. That Cecibel is a smart one. On this day we visited Post Office Bay and learned the history of the area. Following a centuries-old tradition, we took the time to sort through the mail and find some post cards to hand deliver. We left our own cards behind with the hope someone would bring them to us someday.

We took a walk to the turtle beach and saw fresh tracks of a Pacific Green Sea Turtle. She was swimming away from her nest as we arrived. On our return walk we stopped and watched American Flamingos in the pond just behind the dunes. Joining the flamingoes were a Whimbrel, a Sanderling, some Lava Herons, White-cheeked Pintails, and a Black-necked Stilt. The day's bird list was long and varied.

That afternoon there was more snorkeling and in the evening lots of fun music with Fiona singing *Crazy* and *Danny Boy*. The requests started pouring in and the whole group was singing along. Brian wowed us with some Sligo solos and joined in on the pop tunes, too.

Thurs., Feb. 8

On this day we left the wilderness behind and visited the inhabited island of Santa Cruz. First up was a stop at Los Gemelos, the twin craters on the side of the highway. At this volcanic formation half our group saw the elusive Woodpecker Finch. The rest of us enjoyed hearing about seeing the Woodpecker Finch. Afterwards we bussed up to El Chayote Farm to see the giant Galápagos tortoises. The seasonal rains were late this year and so the vegetation wasn't very deep or thick. While a dry wet season isn't good news for all creatures, it makes for prime tortoise viewing. We saw many fine creatures and they were in the mood for love. Tortoise mating is not as sexy as it sounds, nor is it a high action event but it is very fun to see. We saw many Galápagos finches here and started checking off some of Darwin's famous species. We walked through a beautiful and long lava tunnel. There were Common Gallinules, Smooth-billed Anis, a Whimbrel, and some Cattle Egrets in the ranch surroundings.

That afternoon we took a tour of the Darwin Center. Giancarlo and Cecibel explained the captive breeding program and the accidental finds of George in the wild and Diego in a zoo. We saw Diego, father of hundreds, in his compound with several lovely ladies. We also saw the remains of George, father of none, hermetically sealed in a case of glass. George was the last of his kind so it's appropriate he has a place where we can forever contemplate the loss of a species.

Afterwards we had free time in town. There was shopping to do and Ecuavoli to watch. The Carnival parade with a band and the local beauty queens came by just as we headed back to the *Letty* for the evening.

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 4 – 11, 2018 | Written by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt

Fri., Feb. 9

On this day we visited one of the most spectacular scenes in the world, Bartolome. We took a boardwalk across a lava landscape to a view of Pinnacle Rock. It was a stout hike but we all made it without distress. Again we were grateful to Cecibel for an early start. We had the island to ourselves and the dark lava was already heating up at 7:30 AM. Our guides explained the geology of the area while we walked. Tuff was discussed at length. We saw some lovely lava cactus starting the process of vegetating the islet. At the viewing deck you can see the isle nipped in with bays on opposing shores and Pinnacle Rock in the center of it all. Afterwards some of us snorkeled. Again, the snorkeling was worth the effort of donning all that gear. White-tipped Sharks lurked in shallow crevasse just below us. The lava landscape continued into the seascape. On our way back from the swim we passed the base of Pinnacle Rock and spotted a Galápagos Penguin. Fiona, on board, was watching the pangas and took note of our stop and saw the penguin from the *Letty* with her binoculars. Impressive skills of observation.

That afternoon we took a panga ride into the Black Turtle Mangroves on Isla Santa Cruz. Right away we happened upon a multi-species feeding frenzy. Sardines were running and everything else was chasing them. Frigatebirds slid down in lazy arcs to just dip the tips of their bills in and flick out a fish. Pelicans and Blue-footed Boobies plunged deep from up high. Herons lined the shore and stabbed at passersby. Meanwhile, bigger fish swam behind the schools and created vortexes of disturbed water.

We traveled deeper into the mangroves and found a Hawksbill Sea Turtle and both White- and Black-tipped Sharks. Then we found one of the most delightful creatures to see from a boat, juvenile Hammerhead Sharks. We had stumbled into the recently discovered Hammerhead Shark nursery. There were clumps of five or more in several locations. Our guide, Giancarlo, had never seen so many baby Hammerheads in one location. Hammerheads at this size look like a fun pet. This is such a recent discovery that it only made the news the week we returned.

More music and more singers let loose in public that night. Roberto slayed Dylan's *Another Cup of Coffee*. Brian showed he's got the chops to improvise on anything we throw at him.

Sat., Feb. 10

The penultimate day. The previous day was one boggling scene or creature after another. On our last full day in the islands we had the time to look around and think about all the beauty we had taken in. First we took a long walk at South Plaza. We saw a hybrid of a land/sea iguana at the entry to the island. This streak faced animal is neither one nor the other. It isn't even known if it can propagate. We also observed courtship between Swallow-tailed Gulls, a nursing Sea Lion and pup, some wrestling Lava Lizards, and some interspecies interactions between Land and Sea Iguanas. I guess they have to interact if they occasionally produce hybrids.

We watched the shearwaters and Swallow-tailed Gulls soaring off the cliffs. A hatchling in a cliff side nest below us was fed by a parent.

That afternoon we snorkeled and hiked at North Seymour. Our hike was full of frigatebirds in all stages of reproduction, from courtship to eggs to hatchlings to juveniles. There were shrub climbing land lizards, too. There were also many Blue-footed Boobies. We saw two male boobies vying for the attention of a lone female. All that foot wagging and sky pointing and she seemed unimpressed. We enjoyed the show.

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 4 – 11, 2018 | Written by Susan & Burt Mittelstadt

Our last night of tunes was full of group singing. The crew joined us for some well-known numbers in both English and Spanish. *Cielito Lindo, Besame Mucho, Quizas*

Sun., Feb. 11

We spent our morning hanging in internet cafes and passing the time before our flight back to reality. Some of us continued on home, while others enjoyed an extension to the Mindo area of Ecuador.

Photo Credits

Blue-footed Boobies, Peg Abbott; Beach Walk, Greg Smith (GS); Lava Heron, GS; Flamingo, Stanley Hillyard; Galápagos Tortoise, Bud Ferguson (BF); Land Iguana, GS; Sally Lightfoot Crab, BF.