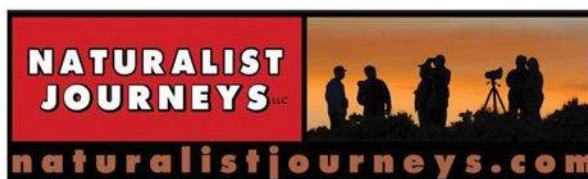


Journey to the Galapagos | Trip Report

November 5 – 12, 2017 | Written by Bob Meinke



With pre-tour field trip to Antisana Ecological Reserve (Nov. 4) and post-tour birding extension to Northwest Ecuador (Mindo and nearby areas) (Nov. 12 – 16).

With hosts Carol Simon and Howard Topoff, National Park naturalists, and 18 participants: Stan and Rosemary, Renata and Keith, Lee and Howard, Susan and Burt, Ed and Rosemary, Phil and Cathy, Bob and Kelly, and Linnea, Carolyn, Alissa, and Austin.

Thu., Nov. 2 & Fri., Nov. 3 Early Arrivals

Over these two days our group assembled, with some first enjoying Quito and before arriving to the lovely Puembo Birding Garden hotel. Puembo Birding Garden caters to birders, including those who stop in Quito prior to flying out to Galápagos or the Amazon. It was an all-inclusive stay, with meals (and local birding, if arranged) included.

12 of us settled in and readied ourselves for the trip to Antisana the following day (Nov. 4).

But backtracking a bit, the first birding of record for the trip occurred at daybreak at Puembo on Nov. 3, once the feeders were stocked and the coffee was ready. Those of us that had arrived were quickly drawn to the hordes of Eared Doves and Saffron Finches, soon to be followed by colorful Scrub Tanagers, the latter a specialty of Ecuador's northern Interandean valleys. Just outside the walls of our compound was a conspicuous Golden Grosbeak, the first of many, as well as several Hooded Siskins. With breakfast served, our attention was drawn to the hummingbird feeders, with the iridescent Sparkling Violetear the dominant species. Other hummers showing up to feed included the demure Western Emerald, White-bellied Woodstar, and Rufous-tailed



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Hummingbird. We then drifted across the lane to an adjacent property (also owned by the owners of PBG), where we picked up Vermilion Flycatcher, Blue-gray Tanager, Golden-rumped Euphonia, Blue-and-white Swallow, and Great Thrush (think of an American Robin dipped in charcoal).

After a bit more coffee, we left for a walk of the area, heading for a nearby avocado orchard and some open fields. The Puembo Birding Garden is set in a quiet haven with mostly walled estates, and we immediately saw a noisy Ringed Kingfisher overhead that had taken up residence in one of the many ponds on these properties. Shortly thereafter we located a stunning Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, a combination of brilliant red and pale green. Once at the orchard, we found Tropical Mockingbird, Yellow-bellied Seedeater, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, a nice Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant, and the local South American subspecies of American Kestrel.



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Lunch was fabulous, a hearty soup along with fresh fruit, and we rested that afternoon after a laid-back morning of birding. It's easy to forget that Puembo is perched below the towering Andes in an 8,000 foot valley. *Whew.* Soon others of our group were checking in, and several of us walked the property again before dinner, getting splendidly close looks at both male and female Black-tailed Trainbearers, one of the most astounding hummingbirds in existence. There were over a dozen of us for dinner (including some UK birders who were flying out that night), and Mercedes outdid herself with fresh salad, local vegetables, and pan-fried corvina. A little wine after dinner, some conversation with our hosts, and then to bed early—the serious birding started tomorrow morning at five o'clock.

Sat., Nov. 4 Antisana Ecological Reserve

Phil and Cathy didn't arrive until 1:00 AM, and a 5:00 AM rise-and-shine for birding seemed out of the question. At least that was the conventional wisdom. But they were not only ready, they weren't even the last to get up. We knew we were in good company. There were 12 of us going to Antisana, with two guides, so not all could fit in one van. So Kelly and Bob arranged to go separately, and then shadow the van as it crept up into the mountains towards the reserve. Trip hosts Howard and Carol traveled with the main group.

Coffee with fruit, cereals, and toast was waiting, after which we all hit the road by 5:30, heading south and eventually east toward the high Andes. As we passed through the outer barrios of greater Quito we spotted Golden Grosbeaks from the vehicles, a close relation to the Yellow Grosbeak that very occasionally slips across the border into southern Arizona. Above us were Blue-and-white Swallows and Black Vultures. Rufous-collared Sparrows were abundant. Despite being well over 8,000 feet, the busy suburban scenery we passed through bore an uncanny resemblance to areas in coastal California, maybe due to the *Eucalyptus* groves that were planted everywhere (and which certainly never grow at such altitudes in their native Australia!).

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Moving away from the cityscape, we passed into montane pastures and farms, where Great Thrush and White-collared Swift were abundant. Overhead we saw our first Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. Our destination was the

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Antisana Ecological Reserve, but we took time for stops along the way. An especially productive break in the drive was had at Restaurante Tambo Condor, which is perched above a steep pasture that led to a shrub-rimmed canyon below. The hummingbird feeders here are a prime attraction, and with the restaurant not open early we had the area to ourselves.

Giant Hummingbird was quickly spotted (it was hard to miss, at nearly seven inches it's the largest hummer in the world), along with Sparkling Violetear, Black-tailed Trainbearer, and the aptly named Shining Sunbeam. Nearby shrubs were teeming with Black Flowerpiercers and Cinereous Conebill, and a foraging Páramo Pipit dodged the horses in a grassy field. A stroll downhill towards some flowering ericaceous thickets quickly produced Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant, Andean Tit-Spinetail, Plain-colored Seedeater, and several Stout-billed Cincloides. Both male and female Shining Sunbeam were here visiting *Macleania* blossoms.

We drove on and soon spotted a Black-winged Ground-Dove on a post, and during a quick pullover, an elusive Grass Wren sang for several minutes before being coaxed into the open. Yet another stop produced Ecuadorian Hillstar, a near-endemic hummingbird for Ecuador that characteristically visits the orange flowers of spiny *Chuquiragua* shrubs. Two crisply patterned Variable Hawks (light morph males) soared overhead.



As we paused for birding breaks on our way up, it was soon apparent we were getting into some serious elevation. Crossing the pass onto the east slope of the Andes, not far from our eventual final stop at the Antisana Reserve, the road crested at over 14,000 feet. *Yowza!* But everyone did well and we took it easy—having been in Puenbo for a couple days ahead was certainly a help with respect to acclimatization. And the birding was fantastic. The beautiful páramo (the thick bunchgrass and tundra habitat of the Andes above tree-line) was alive with Plumbeous Sierra-Finch and Tufted Tit-Tyrant, and there were hordes of Andean Gulls along with scattered Black-faced Ibis and Carunculated Caracara on the more open fields. And we were very

fortunate to get great looks (against a beautiful blue sky) at multiple Andean Condors, arguably the largest living raptor, and certainly one of our most sought-after species of the day.

We arrived at Antisana to overflow crowds, as it was a holiday weekend (the day before was the *Independence of Cuenca* celebration). As part of an environmental awareness promotion, two kids dressed as an Andean Condor and a Spectacled Bear greeted us as we arrived! Some of us birded near the visitor center where a Tawny Antpitta was unexpectedly discovered in the open by Bob and guide José—other birds in the immediate area included Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Many-striped Canastero, and Chestnut-winged Cincloides (all vocalizing along the trail or near the car-park).

A few of us were up for the brief walk towards a nearby lake (Laguna de la Mica). We were accompanied by Brown-bellied Swallows and then picked out Slate-colored Coot, Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Teal, Andean Ruddy

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Duck, and a few tiny Silvery Grebes on the water below. On our way back to Puembo we stopped again at Restaurante Tambo Condor (for lunch), where Green-tailed Trainbearer was at the hummingbird feeders. We were offered a choice of grilled chicken or trout, with vegetables, rice, fresh pineapple juice, and an interesting first course of mixed legumes and corn. Delicious!

We birded just a bit on the way back to Puembo, with some in the group picking up a Blue-backed Conebill. We returned to Puembo Birding Garden late in the afternoon, just as a pair of Harris's Hawks landed in trees near the property. Dinner was at 7:00 and fantastic, and included homemade berry sorbets for dessert! And then it was time to pack and get some rest, in advance of our departure to Galápagos the following morning.

Sun., Nov. 5

Departure for Galápagos | San Cristóbal Island

We had a 9:00 AM Avianca flight to San Cristóbal Is. in the Galápagos this morning. Bidding an early adieu to Mercedes, those of us in Puembo rendezvoused with the rest of our group at the airport, arriving in time to meet the Ecoventura reps and get checked in by the proper authorities for our trip (the carefully regulated travel regimen that characterizes visits to the Galápagos had started). We then proceeded to the departure lounge. After leaving Quito, our flight stopped briefly in Guayaquil, where Austin and Alissa boarded the plane and joined us. The group, now intact at 20, departed Guayaquil for San Cristóbal Island and our expedition yacht, the *Letty*.

The roughly two-hour flight was uneventful, and upon arrival we went through a final cross-checking by local inspectors before being released with our luggage. Ecoventura staff who were working the *Letty* during our trip were waiting for us. After a quick group photo, and a chance to pick up our first endemic species for the islands right on the airport grounds (i.e., the San Cristóbal Mockingbird and San Cristóbal Lava Lizard), we left for the port at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno for a panga (rubberized dinghy) ride out to the *Letty* (which was moored in the harbor). Once on board, we enjoyed a very nice lunch (the giant shrimp skewers were perfect), checked out our cabins and stowed luggage, had a brief safety lecture, and then returned to shore for a hike on San Cristóbal to



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Puerto Chino beach, not far from Puerto Baquerizo Moreno (the small town by the airport which serves as the capital for Galápagos Province).

Walking through coastal scrub vegetation and along the rocky shore, we broke into two groups and got to know our National Park-approved naturalist guides—Fabricio and Franklin, both Ecuadorian citizens, with Franklin actually from the Galápagos—who would be with us shipboard during our voyage. Almost immediately we began picking up bird and animal species unique to the islands. Yellow Warblers were common near shore (an island subspecies), as were San Cristóbal Lava Lizards. Our first Galápagos Flycatchers were spotted on this walk, as well. We finally reached a small bay that was well-stocked with some very relaxed California Sea Lions (actually a subspecies that often goes by *Galápagos Sea Lion*), where we also found the endemic Lava Gull, the rarest species of gull in the world. Dark and sooty-colored with inky black feet, prominent white eye arcs, and a red mouth, only 400 to 500 pairs of this unique gull species remain extant. We saw at least a dozen adult birds on the sand at Puerto Chino, and



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like a great many of the species on the islands, they were ridiculously approachable.

After our hike, we returned to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno to await the return of the pangas from the *Letty*. We had an hour or so to pick up any final necessities from the small stores near the port area, or we could just wander around the town. While sitting by the pier, some of us recorded our first Striated Herons (a sort of melanistic, but now taxonomically unrecognized, Galápagos race of the species, often referred to as *Lava Heron*), as well as migratory Semipalmated Plover, Wandering Tattler, and Ruddy Turnstone. Brown Pelicans were also common here.

We returned to the ship in time to freshen up, possibly grab a beverage, and receive the first of our daily evening briefings (from Franklin or Fabricio) that would detail our itinerary for the following day. Before dinner we met the entire crew, from the Captain to the sous-chef, and enjoyed a welcome drink with them.

Then it was on to dinner, which each evening was amazingly prepared, wonderfully fresh, and reasonably portioned, presented to us by wait staff. (Lunches on the other hand, also unfailingly delicious, were always mammoth buffets, which while at least offering you the option of serving yourself a modest helping, nonetheless lurked as dietary traps—but then that's where the hiking, kayaking, and snorkeling during the trip paid dividends!). Tonight's dinner, accompanied by some Chilean wines for those who enjoy a reasonable Malbec or Pinot Gris, included a choice of seasoned pork loin or braised local octopus—both, by all accounts, were splendid and well-received.



We were also introduced to the shipboard custom of “dining with the Captain,” wherein four of our party would join him at his table each night, to hear his often hilarious and occasionally ribald tales of the sea. This first night Bob, Kelly, Ed, and Rosemary were the honorees, and we enjoyed stories about the captain's family, his career in the Navy, and the deplorable behavior of certain Asian nations and their factory fishing fleets that are wreaking havoc across the eastern Pacific, including the Galápagos. Captain Peter was passionate about his work and conservation in the Galápagos Islands, and we all learned much from our discussions with him.

Before the dinner ended the ship was already underway for Genovesa Is., nearly 100 miles NNW of San Cristóbal. The crew's almost casual recommendation earlier that afternoon, that we might want to get ahead of the game and consider starting a motion sickness remedy of some sort, before evening set in, proved to be a wise if not altogether heeded suggestion. So, some of us fared better than others during that first open ocean transit on the *Letty*. But on the bright side, the few who felt the effects of the sea that night recovered quickly, and ended up largely immune the rest of the trip (even though we later had other rough crossings between islands). They evidently had their sea legs by then. And for those who looked outside this evening as we travelled, the full moon and clouds were gorgeous, and the ship was being followed closely by ghostly flocks of Swallow-tailed Gulls, the

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only gull species known to feed exclusively at night. All in all, a fine first day!

Mon., Nov. 6 Arrival on Genovesa Is. | Darwin Bay & Prince Philip's Steps

We awoke the morning of Nov. 6 with the *Letty* anchored in the collapsed caldera that forms Darwin Bay at Genovesa Is. We were still getting used to the stairs between decks (more like slanted ladders) as we went in search of our first tea or coffee of the day, and in what would become routine for many of us, then headed (cup in hand) up to the outdoor observation area on the top deck.



The view outside was otherworldly. The seasonal rains had not yet arrived in the Galápagos (they generally start in December or January), and the islands were still largely devoid of greenery, with the scrub vegetation just barely leafing out for the year. As a result, the exclusively volcanic substrate, with its gray and brownish tones, dominated the scene, interrupted only by the contrasting white splashes of guano on the cliffs and seawalls. The nearly monochromatic color scheme gave a harsh, almost wintery look to the island, which was only enhanced by the overcast morning. Seabirds were literally everywhere, and it was clearly time to start getting re-acquainted with storm-petrels and boobies!



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After more coffee and breakfast (another hearty buffet), we got ready to head ashore. We would take the pangas in to Prince Philip's Steps, a simple rock stairway that begins at the waterline and ascends a cleft in the cliff face. Once on top, the trail is easy and level. This would be a "dry" landing, so we would step directly from the bobbing panga onto the rock ledge where the steps begin. Sounded sketchy, but turned out to be easy.

As we approached the steps from the sea, it was obvious why uninhabited Genovesa is an anticipated stop for visitors to the Galápagos, especially the birders. Red-billed Tropicbirds and Great Frigatebirds soared overhead, Galápagos Shearwaters patrolled the cliffs, Elliot's Storm-Petrels pattered across the open water, and both Nazca and Red-footed Boobies were actively flying and perched on the rocks as we came in.

After scrambling up the rock steps, we emerged into a mostly leafless xeriscape, visually dominated by stunted Palo Santo trees (*Bursera graveolens*), prickly-pear (*Opuntia* sp.), and saltbush (*Cryptocarpus* sp.). Lava lizards were almost everywhere we went in the Galápagos, but did not occur here! The first bird observed on our trek was Galápagos Mockingbird, an endemic species (but found on several islands). One was engaged in a fight to the death with a Galápagos Giant Centipede (the bird prevailed), something the guides had never seen before. The centipede is evidently quite rare. Howard filmed the event—it was a macabre yet fascinating affair.



There were Galápagos Flycatchers and Yellow Warblers here, as well. We also got our first lengthy exposure to the fabled Darwin's finches, including Gray Warbler-Finch, Genovesa Cactus-Finch, and Genovesa Ground-Finch, all strictly endemic to Genovesa Is. We also saw Large Ground-Finch (endemic to the Galápagos, but not restricted to Genovesa). Near the end of the trail we approached a barren plateau that overlooked the sea, where flocks of Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrels were swirling. We watched for Short-eared Owl, which preys on the petrels at this location, but none were found.

On our way back to the steps we had beautiful views of Darwin Bay. As we descended, our path was nearly blocked by a Swallow-tailed Gull that had no plans to move, but we managed to step cautiously around it. Although this species is considered nocturnal (it feeds at night to avoid harassment by the frigatebirds), it is easy to see in daylight as well, usually resting on rocks near the water. It is a beautiful gull and endemic to the Galápagos Is., and many were in residence on Genovesa Is.

We enjoyed lunch and spent the rest of the day watching birds from the ship, taking a panga excursion for better looks at the cliffs, kayaking (Linnea had a championship stint on the stand-up paddleboard), or snorkeling near the stone steps. On the beach we saw an enormous colony of Red-footed Boobies, perched in the brush and congregating on the beach. Genovesa is one of very few places where this chiefly pelagic booby species can be seen en masse. An endemic Galápagos Martin was also picked up flying over the cliffs by the kayakers.

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Late afternoon we had our first of four lectures by Carol and Howard, which focused on the geology and natural history of the Galápagos Islands, a great introduction. The ship band (the Gypsy Carpenters) then took over for the first of several impromptu performances. Dinner that evening featured a choice of fruit-stuffed sirloin, or shrimp and wild rice. We were soon on our way south towards Santa Cruz Is.

Tues., Nov. 7 Santa Cruz Is. | Landing at Las Bachas

The overnight passage from Genovesa, smoother than the previous night, was pleasant and we approached Santa Cruz Is. ready to explore. Watching from the sun deck up top with coffee in hand, we saw Galápagos Green Turtles several times before breakfast, including a group that appeared to be in some sort of a mating frenzy. Prior to landing on Santa Cruz, Carol and Charles Darwin (*aka Howard Topoff*) gave us an entertaining rundown on the history of Darwin's work in the Galápagos, providing some valuable perspective.

Although we had glimpsed Blue-footed Booby earlier at San Cristóbal, we were inundated by the species here on Santa Cruz, where several male birds were already practicing their foot-raising courtship displays. We also spotted the endemic Lava Gull again, Brown Pelicans, Brown Noddys, and two storm-petrel species (Elliot's and the much rarer Band-rumped) as we came on shore. We then had our first opportunity to master the art of the "wet landing" (i.e., essentially tumbling out of the not-quite-beached rubbery pangas, one after the other, hopefully

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timing our lunges to minimize our chances of getting soaked by the rolling surf).

Las Bachas—a white, sandy beach on Santa Cruz that is a major nesting site for sea turtles—is excellent for swimming (and snorkeling), and features the remains of a once floating dock used by U.S. forces during WWII. Behind the beach were saline lagoons, where we found several strikingly-pink American Flamingoes feeding. With the deciduous scrub species on the island still essentially leafless, it was a stark yet beautiful setting. Birds sharing the lagoon with the flamingoes included Black-necked Stilts, Whimbrels, White-cheeked Pintails, and a Great Blue Heron. Sanderlings and Least Sandpipers, both visiting migrants, scurried along the banks.

We also had the chance to walk inland during our stop, where we were surprised to see Smooth-billed Anis, a species that was actually introduced from mainland Ecuador. Other wildlife encountered along the way included numerous Galápagos Mockingbirds, intermixed flocks of Medium and Small Ground-Finch, Common Cactus-Finch (fittingly nectaring on an *Opuntia* flower), Galápagos Flycatcher, and many Lava Lizards. After lunch (featuring fresh ceviche), we visited a site (Cerro Dragon) where we had our first close looks at Marine Iguanas.

We were then on our way to Fernandina Is., which was around the far side of Isabella Is. from our position near Santa Cruz. So we had some serious sailing to do. Before dinner we had the chance to again scan the sea from the top of the ship for pelagic species. Frigatebirds and noddys were following us, and we worked on separating Elliot's and Band-rumped Storm-Petrels, not an easy task as the Letty was moving and storm-petrels seldom stay still. Pork roast or grilled salmon (followed by crème brûlée!) were on tap for dinner, and music by the ship band (the Gypsy Carpenters) was a great prelude. Next stop, Fernandina Is.

Wed., Nov. 8 Fernandina & Isabela Islands | Iguanas & Poison-Apple Tree

Today was the first of two days on Fernandina and Isabela, islands that make up most of the land mass of the



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Galápagos, and which (unlike Santa Cruz) have virtually nothing in the way of human habitation. Our first stop was Fernandina, one of the most pristine of the Galápagos Islands—after an early breakfast (highlights were stuffed crepes and sweet corn dumplings), we headed out in the pangas towards our landing on the rocks at Punta Espinosa, dodging a series of strafing runs by the Blue-footed Boobies as they came in.

The enormous population of Marine Iguanas that greeted us here was really



something to behold. There were probably thousands of iguanas basking over several acres, including some very large and impressive males. It was almost impossible to stop taking pictures, the site was so compelling. While in some ways it was a scene familiar to most (if not all) of us, from previously-watched Galápagos nature documentaries or perhaps a coffee table book or two, witnessing it first-hand was something else entirely. It was just astounding, a sight not to be forgotten. Amongst the iguanas were many lava lizards, and then a very nice find here was a Galápagos Snake, which retreated into a crevice when we approached. It was one of only two we would see. Considering lizards are a

primary prey item for the snakes, it seems curious they were so uncommon.

But there were more than reptiles to see on Fernandina, and we headed inland for a hike. Our first new bird here was the endemic Galápagos Hawk, and we saw two of them. We then got a glimpse of a Galápagos Penguin (a

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hint of things to come), and also found several blue-eyed Flightless Cormorants, certainly an iconic species for the islands if ever there was one (the cormorant is actually endemic to only Fernandina and Isabela). Shorebirds we found here were all migrants and included Wandering Tattler, Whimbrel, Semipalmated Plover, Striated Heron, and a pair of American Oystercatchers. Inland species of note included (new for the trip) Small Tree-Finch, as well as additional Galápagos Flycatchers and mixed flocks of the ground finch species.

Perhaps the botanical prizewinner of the trip was the Lava Cactus (*Brachycereus nesioticus*), a clonal species that colonizes bare basalt outcrops here at Punta Espinosa and elsewhere. A monotypic species and a Galápagos endemic, it was very photogenic despite not being in flower.



Back on ship, we indulged in lunch (Cuban shredded beef stew with cauliflower and crispy bacon salad stood out), then motored across the Bolivar Channel to Urbina Bay, on Isabela Is., the largest of the Galápagos Islands. It was only afternoon that maybe qualified as hot during the trip, but we had plenty of

water. Walking through the scrub forest we learned about Darwin's Cotton (*Gossypium darwinii*) and Poison-apple Tree or Manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*), the former a rare endemic, the latter a highly toxic species that's widespread in the American tropics.

We also had our first encounter with Land Iguanas here, when we came across two brightly-colored males engaged in an apparent territorial stand-off along the trail, which involved a lot of hissing and posturing. We tentatively slipped past them without incident. Also in the immediate vicinity were a couple Alcedo Giant Tortoises, our first of the trip. One posed at length for photographs before staggering off into the brush.



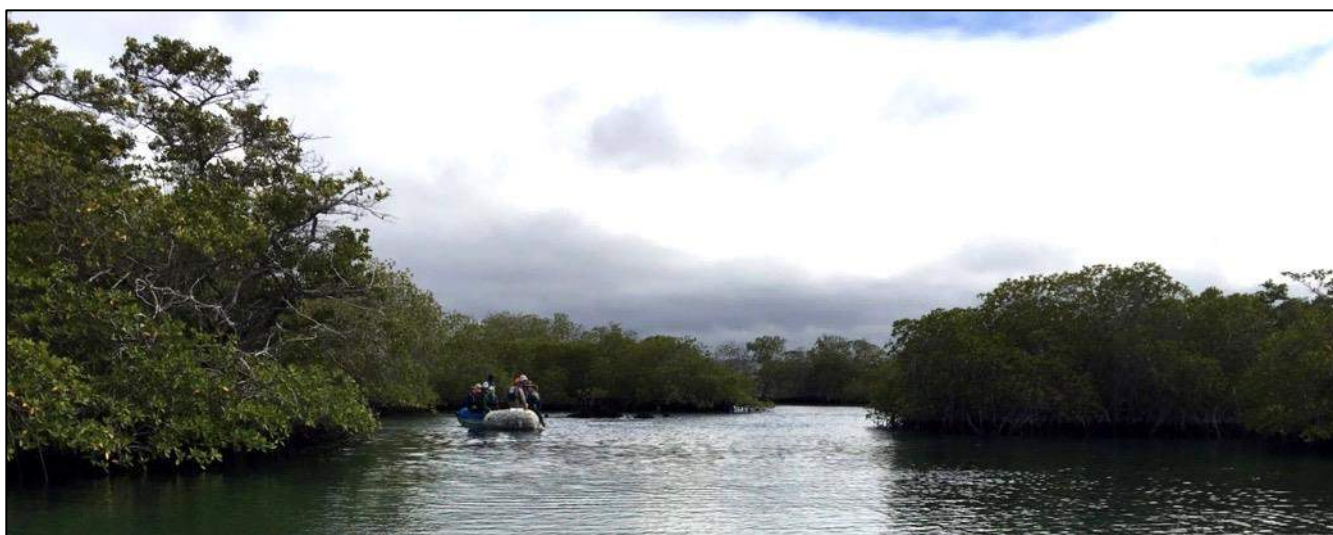
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At the end of the walk some of the group took advantage of a swim to cool off. Then it was back on board for a brief trip down-island to Elizabeth Bay. On the way, we managed to finally confirm that the large rafts of delicate seabirds we'd been seeing off and on, which always seemed to spin and drift just beyond binocular view, were indeed Red-necked Phalaropes. Tonight's dinner started with an amuse-bouche trilogy of shrimp, octopus, and calamari, followed by either beef tenderloin or Peruvian-style tuna. Without a long voyage planned for the evening, a few of us took the opportunity for a little post-dinner discussion, a species list recap, or a glass of wine before retiring.

Thurs., Nov. 9 Isabela Is. | Mangroves, Penguins & Darwin Lake

After coffee and the customary breakfast buffet (the green plantain dumplings were a tasty "local cuisine option" this morning), our second day on Isabela Is. started at Elizabeth Bay. With no visits allowed on land at this site, our stop here focused on a panga trip around the craggy Mariela Islets (Brown Noddy and Blue-footed Booby



were on nest sites), followed by a two-hour excursion into a nearby Red Mangrove lagoon where we were fortunate to not only see many Galápagos Green Turtles, but also had close looks at Hawksbill as well, the latter one of the most endangered of the world's sea turtles. Below us in the clear, shallow water were schools of White-spotted Eagle Rays and juvenile Whitetip Reef Sharks. On the avian side, we picked up a Franklin's Gull here, a North American migrant that our guides said had arrived well ahead of schedule. There were also several Galápagos Penguins on the small rocks near the mouth of the lagoon, as well as Striated Herons.

By lunch time we were on board and heading back north along the western coast of Isabela Is. It was a pleasant day with blue skies by early afternoon, and we sat up top watching for pelagics as we headed for Tagus Cove, our next stop. Galápagos Shearwaters, various storm-petrels, and Brown Noddys were common, as were Red-necked Phalaropes.

We pulled into Tagus Cove in early afternoon. While the surf was surging a bit outside the cove, inside it was tranquil enough to encourage snorkeling and kayaking, and just about everyone took advantage of the opportunity. To round out the day, the group then split up, with some of us choosing the uphill hike towards

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Darwin Lake, and the others opting for yet another panga ride (to try for some close-up views of the penguins and cormorants on the nearby cliffs). The hiking group had luck on their side, and came across a Woodpecker Finch, the only example of this species seen really well during the trip. Perhaps the most celebrated of Darwin's finches, Woodpecker Finches have attracted attention for their remarkable use of “tools” to assist them in feeding. This bird was, in fact, packing a small stick. A nice find.

Now the panga ride began innocently enough, and we did get some extraordinarily close views of Flightless Cormorant and Galápagos Penguin along the surf line on the rocks, easily the best of the trip. There were also numerous Swallow-tailed Gulls and both frigatebird species, and a Galápagos Hawk was seen patrolling the upper cliffs. But in time our eyes strayed towards the open sea, and to everyone's glee, a number of spouts could be seen! Yes! Not satisfied with birds alone, our panga crew heaved to, spun around and the chase was on. Invigorating at first, as we streaked out into the Bolivar Channel in our little dinghy, it soon became apparent that (1) we were never going to catch the whales, and (2) at least some of us were going to get really wet. So, logic won out over enthusiasm in the end, and the panga guys returned us to the ship in time to meet the hikers for a late afternoon drink, and a further review of our burgeoning species list.

Then it was on to dinner (salmon carpaccio to start, followed by seafood fettuccini or grilled chicken, with homemade strawberry cheesecake—yum). The group retired fairly soon after—the *Letty* was already moving (a long voyage lay ahead, all the way to Santiago Is.), and we were being warned of a bumpy ride ahead. And yet while that turned out to be true, by this time all on board were getting used to the motion, and no one seemed the worse for wear the next morning.

Fri., Nov. 10 Santiago & Rábida Is. | Fur Seals, Cactus & Doves

Despite the unsettled seas of the previous night, we were nonetheless refreshed and ready to roll. Once breakfast was wrapped up, we left straightaway for our landing at the Puerto Egas black sand beach, where we would access today's trailhead on Santiago Is. This turned out to be the most adventurous of our wet landings, and it was a good thing we were wearing quick-dry shirts and pants, as some of us got a drenching. But

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November humidity is low in the Galápagos, and even on an overcast day (like today) we had pretty much dried out before we were 15 minutes into our hike.

Ground-Finches and Small Tree-Finch were common, as were the tattlers, plovers, whimbrels, oystercatchers, and turnstones we'd become accustomed to seeing along the shoreline of other islands. Sally Lightfoot Crabs were especially common here, and we saw thousands, as were Yellow Warblers. Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies were everywhere, and Galápagos Shearwaters and Brown Noddys traversed above the sea cliffs. We also got a good look at a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. And this was the best place on the trip to get close-up looks at the endemic Galápagos Fur Seal (also seen briefly on Fernandina)—several adults and pups were lounging on the rocks.

Probably the second-most intriguing predator-prey interaction of the trip (*after the centipede incident*) was witnessed during this hike, while our intrepid park naturalist (Franklin) was busy addressing us on an important topic. A few of us heard a quiet squabble in the brush nearby, and turning our attention, we suddenly saw a Galápagos Hawk take flight with a huge

Galápagos Snake wriggling in its talons! Wow, *endemic versus endemic*! Nothing like being at the right place at the right time (though perhaps not so for the snake, of course).



After three hours on Santiago, we were soon all having lunch back on the *Letty* (to the tune of sautéed shrimp, refried white corn, and a crisp salad). The ship was preparing to move the short distance to Rábida, just off the south coast of Santiago. Rábida is a small, arid island with generally steep slopes, and most of the coastline is rocky except for a

beach on the northeast side. There is a comparatively high amount of iron in the basalt here, which gives Rábida a “rustier” appearance than most other islands.

We had a wet landing on Rábida (less dramatic than at Santiago) and enjoyed a brisk afternoon walk in the warm

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sunshine. The scenery here was stunning, what with the red-hued landscape, still leafless vegetation, and large number of tree cacti. Not surprisingly, this was an easy place to see Common Cactus-Finch. Rábida was also a very good island for the endemic Galápagos Dove, a beautiful, buff-colored species with prominent blue eye rings, quite unlike any doves on the mainland.

The afternoon was spent snorkeling or kayaking, or on a panga ride to view the coastal cliffs of Rábida. Carol and Howard also gave an instructive lecture today on animal adaptations in the Galápagos. After a bit of relaxing, it was time for dinner—we had a difficult choice between fresh-caught corvina with peanut sauce or beef tournedos, and the warm chocolate coulant was, for many of us, the most decadent dessert of the trip. We left later this evening on our relatively short cruise to the town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Is.

Sat., Nov. 11 Santa Cruz Is. | Giant Tortoises & Darwin Station

We arrived early morning at Puerto Ayora, well and away the largest and busiest settlement in the Galápagos. Situated in Academy Bay on the southern coast of Santa Cruz, Puerto Ayora is the heart and soul of the human population of the archipelago, and its main tourist hub. Our walks in the wild places of the Galápagos were now over, having ended the day before on Rábida, and for these last two days of the trip we'd be learning a bit about human activities and the pressing conservation issues on the islands.

After breakfast on board the *Letty*, we went ashore and boarded a van for a Giant Tortoise sanctuary (Poza El Chato), located on a private farm in the highlands of central Santa Cruz Is. We had opportunities here for viewing wild tortoises roaming through pastures in the agricultural zone, as well as in the nearby brush (this particular species was the Western Santa Cruz Giant Tortoise).

We also spent some time exploring and birding on the farm. We entered a lava tube that sheltered a roosting



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Barn Owl (a subspecies endemic to the Galápagos), and there were many flocks of ground- and tree- finches to sort through. We also saw Cattle Egret and Common Gallinule here, as well as our last species new to the trip (at the farm's pond), i.e., the Green Warbler-Finch (skillfully picked up by Renata and Kelly).

We then returned to the *Letty* for lunch (chicken lasagna and those giant shrimp skewers again), before returning to shore for a tour of the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora. It was interesting to hear about the role the station plays in the conservation of habitats and species in the islands, and to see the baby tortoise nurseries. Clearly the gravest immediate threat facing the biodiversity of the Galápagos are introduced species, especially plant species, but animal as well, and Santa Cruz is one of the most impacted islands. Carol and Howard's final lecture for us focused on this very topic.

Our last evening in the Galápagos offered us a choice: go back and dine as usual on the *Letty*, or stay on in Puerto Ayora a bit longer and have dinner at La Garrapata, a restaurant suggested by our guide Fabricio. Garrapata means 'tick' in Spanish, and naming your

café after a blood-sucking arthropod just seemed so peculiar, somehow (but maybe it's an inside joke—ha-ha). In any case, the seafood here was exceptional, and those of us who temporarily stayed on shore to enjoy it (Rosemary, Ed, Austin, Alissa, Bob, and Kelly) weren't disappointed. The rest of the group enjoyed a festive final meal on board the *Letty*, before it weighed anchor and we all left for San Cristóbal that night.



Sun., Nov. 12 San Cristóbal Is. | Departing Galápagos

This morning we were back where we started, in the harbor at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristóbal Is. A quick panga ride for some of us nailed down the San Cristóbal

Mockingbird for those who hadn't seen it earlier, then our luggage was loaded and taken to the airport. We stopped in town for some final shopping, making a particular effort to sample any bakeries that happened to be open on a Sunday morning. Then it was time to line up and catch our flight back to the mainland.

We arrived late afternoon in Quito after the short flight. Burt and Susan were staying on in Ecuador for several

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days to visit friends. Ed, Rosemary, Kelly, and Bob were also remaining, leaving the next morning on a four-day trip for some birding on the west slope of the Andes. Those staying behind lodged again that night at the Puembo Birding Garden, in anticipation of early road departures Monday morning. The rest of us caught late night flights on Sunday back to the U.S., heading home to sort our photos, tell travel stories, and get ready for the upcoming holidays. It was a unique experience and an amazing trip—no doubt some of us will return to the Galápagos to see more of these beautiful islands!

Mon., Nov. 13 – Thurs., Nov. 16 Birding the West Andean Slope

By the time Ed, Rosemary, Kelly, and Bob were up at 5:00 AM, getting ready to leave for Mindo (a small town northwest of Quito), most of the Galápagos group were already arriving back home in the States. Without going into tremendous detail here, the four days that were spent birding the Andes, while certainly full and at times challenging, were truly an unforgettable experience.

The Mindo Valley comprised a montane watershed where two of the most biologically diverse ecoregions in the world converge: the Choco lowlands and the Tropical Andes. The forests here were in remarkable condition, and the birding was off the charts. In less than four days, with our guide Iris, we added 259 species to our Ecuador trip list, in addition to the 57 birds the main group already picked up in the Galápagos. Our evenings were all spent at Sachatamia Lodge, located about two hours west of Quito if you drive straight through, at roughly 4,000 feet elevation. The casitas, meals, and common areas here were exquisite, and the lodge catered to birders and natural history buffs. Not surprisingly, they had an amazing array of well-maintained hummingbird and fruit feeders, for whenever you just felt like kicking back and watching. They also had a pair of resident Black-and-white Owls (generally not easy to see) that serenaded us nightly with their cat-like meowing.

We birded various destinations on day trips from Sachatamia, ranging from the amazing Yanacocha Reserve at almost 11,000 feet to the canopy tower at Rio Silanche, nearly 9,000 feet lower. Other highly productive sites we visited included the Alambi and Bella Vista cloud forest reserves, the Milpe bird sanctuary, the Tandayapa Valley, and Refugio Paz de las Aves.

We saw 31 hummingbird species during the four days, three trogons, five toucans, six antpittas, 23 tyrant flycatchers, 10 warblers, and 41 tanagers and their allies, among many others. (These birds are all included in the separate species list for the Galápagos trip.)

Of the 259 species we saw, some of the most satisfying included Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, White-whiskered Hermit, Velvet-purple Coronet, Violet-tailed Sylph, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Giant and Yellow-breasted Antpittas, and Scarlet-breasted Dacnis, all of which are Choco Ecoregion endemics. From a purely gaudy perspective, species such as Golden, Blue-necked, Beryl-spangled, and Glistening-green Tanager were hard to beat, not to mention Andean Cock-of-the-rock, Green Honeycreeper, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Green-and-black Fruiteater, Golden-headed Quetzal, and Rufous Motmot. We packed a lot of birding into four days, and it was very much worth the effort!

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Eared Doves, Puembo Birding Garden (Ed Madej, **EM**)
Xavier Muñoz and Ed Madej (Bob Meinke, **BM**)

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Black-tailed Trainbearer (**EM**)

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Observation Deck, road to Antisana (Stan Hillyard, **SH**)
Chuquiragua sp., near Antisana (Kelly Amsberry, **KA**)
Páramo transition vegetation (**BM**)

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Andean Condor and Spectacled Bear (**KA**)

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En route to Galápagos: Ed and Stan (**BM**)
The *Letty* (**SH**)
Renata boards the *Letty* (**BM**)

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California Sea Lions, San Cristóbal (**BM**)
Captain and crew (**BM**)

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Captain and Kelly (**BM**)

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Swallow-tailed Gull, San Cristóbal (**BM**)
Palo Santo scrub forest hike, Rábida (**BM**)

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Galápagos Giant Centipede, Genovesa (Howard Topoff, **HT**)

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Red-footed Booby, Genovesa (**BM**)
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Blue-footed Booby, Santa Cruz (**SH**)
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Marina Iguanas, Fernandina (**BM**)
Flightless Cormorant, breeding pair (**HT**)

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Lava Cactus close-up, Fernandina (**KA**)
Lava cactus, with Linnea and Susan (**BM**)
Land Iguana, Isabela (**SH**)

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Visiting cormorants and penguins from the panga, Isabela (**BM**)

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Xeric landscape, Rábida (**BM**)

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Lobsters (**BM**)
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Mindo Valley, through the foliage (**BM**)
Flowering Gunnera sp., Yanacocha (**KA**)
At Refugio Paz de las Aves (**KA**)