

Journey to the Galapagos | Trip Report | Feb. 6-13, 2022 with Mainland Ecuador Extension | by Dan Donaldson



With Naturalist Journeys guide Dan Donaldson and local guides Carolina and Diego (in Galapagos), with 12 participants: Brenda, Dawn, Edie, Gerald, Jim, John, Judith, Kim, Marjorie, Nan, Susan, and Will.



Our February 2022 journey along the Northern Galapagos Island route was an incredible experience with perfect weather for the entire trip and incredible birding at every destination. Our daily snorkeling outings were delightful with plenty of aquatic wildlife including terrific experiences with sea turtles, marine iguanas, flightless cormorants, Galapagos Penguins, and over 30 species of reef fish. This trip even included an unscheduled stop at Bartolome! – a real bonus that is normally only enjoyed by those on the southern islands.

Sat., Feb. 5 Mainland Ecuador

Our Antisana pre-trip. Most of our group arrived the night before and enjoyed a group meetup and dinner together in the Holiday Inn Hotel. On this morning, bagged breakfasts were ready for us so we could meet our local guide Sandra at 7:00 a.m. for our early departure to Antisana. We headed to explore the high paramo, unique grassland 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 12 boarded a comfortable bus and began our journey high into the Andes. Heading to Antisana, we drove through the busy city of Quito with its over 2 million residents. It sits in a valley at over 9,000 feet bordered to the east and west by mountain ranges that rise to 15,000 feet. Our bus 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 Sunbeams, Black-tailed



Trainbearers, and Sparkling Violetears were patrolling feeders and Eared Doves picked at the earth below. In the fields around the restaurant, we observed numbers of Great Thrush, Black Flower Piercers and Andean Gulls. 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 on cliffs in the distance here. We quickly boarded our bus to get to our next location for 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 Metaltails, Great Sapphirewings, Giant Hummingbirds, Paramo Sedge Wrens, Yellow-breasted Brushfinches, and Plain-colored Seedeaters. Four Andean Condors were present here and we observed them roosting across the valley. Driving on 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 a juvenile condor on the ground along with a Carunculated Caracara. 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, Ecuadorian Hillstars, both Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Plain-capped Ground, and Brown-backed Chat Tyrants, 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, where we find Plumbeous Sierra Finches, allowed for better views of the lake and we spotted Andean Teal, Andean Duck, Silvery Grebe, Yellow-billed Pintail, and Slate-colored Coot. On the drive back down from Laguna de Mica, we were able to locate Andean or 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 hummingbirds. From the deck, we got wonderful views and photos of giant hummingbirds, and added a few new species for the day, Cinereous Conebills, Hooded Siskins, Black Vultures, and a mob of Black Flowerpiecers. We garnered 42 species on this first bonus day at Antisana with Ecuadorian Hillstars, Giant Hummingbirds, Black-winged Doves, and of course, Andean Condors as our standout birds of the day. We returned to Quito and the Holiday Inn, 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., Feb. 6 Arrivals | Pto Baquerizo | Genovesa Island

We departed our hotel early in order to arrive at the airport at 7:00 am for our flight to the Galapagos, with a quick stop in Guayaquil where some more participants joined us there. Our group was now assembled and with the roar of the engines we're off on our adventure of a lifetime. The weather was clear and sunny as our plane descended and the Galapagos Island of San Cristobal came into view, and we got our first glimpses of the island's incredible volcanic landscape. Once on the ground, we taxied through cacti and coastal scrub forest to the tarmac in front of the airport. The doors opened and the warm Pacific air rushed in. We deplaned on the tarmac, walking down the stairs across the tarmac to the airport. We got our official Galapagos stamp on our passports in customs, picked up our luggage and met our local guides as we exited the airport.

We were bussed the short way through Puerto Baquerizo Moreno to the marina where our pangas (dingies) were waiting for us. At the marina, we immediately began our Galapagos experience – the area was alive with wildlife. Frigate Birds were soaring on the breeze overhead and Blue-footed Boobies were diving for food in the turquoise waters of the bay. As we walked from the sidewalk onto the pier, we passed over a small tide pool filled with young Galapagos Sea Lions frolicking with each other or any item they can pick up and play with. The surrounding rocks were covered with brilliantly colored Sally Light Foot crabs that *must mind their personal space between them and the seals lest they become a toy*. With our binoculars and cameras already out, it took us 20 minutes to walk the hundred or so yards to the pangas with so much to stop and watch. Every flat spot accessible from the water had a Galapagos Sea Lion sleeping on it, or at least trying to, as many sea lions were barking from the water and trying to climb up between them. At the panga docks, we walked through the largest of the seals (must have been the coveted spot!) to get to our pangas. Once aboard, we motored off to the Letty where the captain and crew were waiting our arrival. Here we were introduced to the crew, the boat and our activities for the rest of the day. We unpacked our luggage, settled in and had our first meal (lunch) onboard the Letty.



After lunch, we returned to Pto Baquerizo to explore the town and pick up any last-minute items before we departed for the week. We also took advantage of this time as our first birding opportunity. Walking back, we noted all the seabirds within view-Lava Gulls, Brown Pelicans, Blue-footed Boobies and Laughing Gulls were all around us. Within our first few steps in town, we were greeted by Darwin's Lesser Ground Finch and a few steps further we heard and found our "must have bird" for this island, the endemic San Cristobal Mockingbird. We walked along the beach in front of town, through pods of sea lions. Many had very young pups, sleeping in any available shady spot. A quick scan of the tide pool areas produced several Wandering Tattlers, Semi-palmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstones, and Whimbrels. We also found several Yellow-crowned Night Herons near the shoreline and witnessed the interesting behavior of wing cupping. The herons were facing in the sun with their wings "cupped." In cooler climates, herons do this to warm in the sun. Here in the Galapagos, the birds may be shading their feet with this behavior or perhaps it is a feather maintenance technique to rid themselves of parasites. After a couple quick stops in the local markets, we headed back to the marina to meet our pangas for transport back to the Letty for our trip to Genovesa Island. We motored to Kicker Rock, a tuft rock formation jutting out of the ocean nearby. Here we watched the sunset as we circled Kicker Rock listening to the calls of boobies and frigate birds on the cliffs above. A group of ten frigate birds used our boat for wind uplift and spent about an hour sailing just above our boat sometime too close to even photograph. Once the sun was down, we enjoyed our dinner, and had our first nightly briefing from the National Park Naturalists and afterwards, our group reviewed our bird checklist for the day. After sharing good night partings, we headed for our cabins excited for what awaited us at Genovesa Island the next morning. Twenty-five island species our first day with Wander Tattlers, Brown Noddies, Lava Gulls, Blue-footed Boobies, and Elliot's Storm Petrel as group favorites.

Mon., Feb. 7 Darwin Bay | Snorkeling

This morning, we woke up to find our boat moored inside of Darwin Bay, the collapsed crater of the volcano that created Genovesa Island. What a way to start the morning! We grabbed our coffees to go outside to greet the morning and were delighted as we watched Nazca Boobies busily flying back and forth and to and from the nearby cliffs. After breakfast, we boarded our pangas to explore the horseshoe shaped Genovesa Island, landing



at Prince Phillip's Steps and climbed to the top of the island. Here we walked through a dry but dense forest that hosts hundreds of Nazca and Red-footed Booby nesting areas. In the colonies were birds of every age class ranging from just a couple days old to 1.5-year-olds remaining close to their parents. Booby chicks were everywhere, and we carefully picked our way along the trail to avoid coming too close. Next, we hiked up to the lava field sea cliffs where several thousand Wedge-tailed Storm Petrels recently arrived to begin their breeding season. The cliffs were created by multiple lava flows and the rock was formed in 3" layers that broke up at the surface into 2–3-foot flat pieces of rock. The jumble of all this broken rock provides countless crevices and nooks that are used as nesting cavities by many species of sea birds, as well as the Short-eared Owl. As we stood there in amazement at the numbers of birds streaming back and forth before our eyes, we spotted a Short-eared Owl resting in a close by cavity in the lava rock. Soon a second owl was spotted sitting at the edge of the cliff but dropped down over the cliff into the storm petrel breeding colony. Our third owl sighting for the day was a Short-eared Owl which flew so close, it nearly brushed a photographer from our group before dropping behind us and landing near us in a collapsed lava tunnel.

We returned to the Letty after hiking and were treated to refreshments and snacks. Snorkeling was our next adventure! After a short break, we met for a snorkeling gear distribution and were fitted with wetsuits and snorkeling gear for the week. Fifteen minutes later, we were off in the pangas again for snorkeling along the reef at Prince Phillip's Steps. We snorkeled directly from the pangas and got our first looks at reef fish, including two sharks, an Oceanic Black-tipped and White-tipped Reef Shark that swam below us on the reef. After our 40-minute snorkeling session, we climbed aboard our pangas and returned to the Letty for lunch. We enjoyed a hot lunch in the dining area of the boat with the afternoon off for siestas to rest or socialize on the Sun Deck.

The protected waters of the collapsed caldera were a wonderful place to kayak and paddle board. Several of our group took this advantage of this free time to paddle along the wall of the caldera where they observed starfish, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, sea urchins and nesting seabirds that *nest along the walls*. Our afternoon hike was at Darwins Beach, also located inside the large caldera. We were greeted by the usual sea lions on the shore along with several juvenile Swallow-tailed Gulls who had very different plumage from adults. Hiking the low coastal beach and coastal forested areas, we soon found Genovesa Cactus Finches picking apart the flowers on the Opuntia (Prickly Pear Cactus) growing along the bottom of the cliffs. We followed a sandy creek valley farther



inland and were greeted by Large Ground Finches on the path. Unfortunately, we also found a small flock of Smooth-billed Ani, a new non-native arrival. These Ani have invaded other islands and is a new expansion here. Our National Park Guide took extensive notes on this discovery so she can report them so management can tackle this new invasion. We also had a chance for afternoon snorkeling, this time deep water snorkeling from the pangas. We observed many of the familiar reef fishes, and these ones in the deep-water reef were much larger than the ones we saw before. We also spotted Hammerhead and White-tipped Reef Sharks. Returning to the Letty, we were greeted with a light snack and local fruit juices. Tonight, we motored south to Santa Cruz Island. Nine new species were added today with Short-eared Owl, Gray Warbler-finch, Genovesa Cactus Finch, and beautiful Swallow-tailed Gulls as the highlights of the day.

Tues., Feb. 8 Bachas Beach | Dragon Hill | Searching for Iguanas

Exploring northern Santa Cruz – We awoke anchored off Bachas Beach on Santa Cruz Island. Our cabins were filled with bright sunlight and an aromatic breakfast spread was waiting for us in the galley. Our first excursion of the day was a wet landing at Bachas Beach. With a wet landing, the pangas run up as far as they can get on the beach and we disembark off the sides of the pangas into ankle deep water. We brought our snorkel gear with us for a quick post-hike snorkel, but started with a hike up the dunes after leaving our gear on the beach. We were excited to see the beach striped with sea turtle tracks from females crawling across the beach to lay eggs the night before. From a vantage point at the top of the dunes, we marveled at the extent of sea turtle nesting activity. We counted over 40 nests, but there were likely many more. We walked further down the beach and came upon a fresh set of tracks and sure enough, we spotted a newly arrived female up in the dunes laying eggs. From a safe distance, we watched her prepare her nest and began laying eggs in the newly dug chamber. We left her in peace and walked away in awe after witnessing one of the most world's most primeval activities.

We walked on though the dune complex and marine scrub forest where we observed Galapagos Mockingbirds, Yellow Warblers, Small Ground Finches, and Medium Ground Finches. Continuing on to an inland lagoon, we got our first looks at American Flamingo with a single individual feeding in the lagoon. Its bright pink plumage was accentuated by the green background of the Red Mangroves surrounding the lagoon. Shorebirds were also



present and Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Black-necked Stilt and Whimbrel were all feeding in the lagoon. Returning to the beach, the nesting sea turtle we observed earlier was now burying her eggs and flipping sand all around the nest site to camouflage her nest. She'll soon make her way back to the sea.

We made our way back to our landing site and half the group snorkeled from the beach while the other half of us continued towards another lagoon. The trail winds through Salt bush and Opuntia Cacti of the coastal lowland zone and a very cooperative Galapagos Flycatcher allowed for as many photos as we could take. We arrived back at the lagoon to find five more American Flamingos very close to the trail. They fed and slept a mere twenty feet from us allowing for long views and many closeup photographs. When feeding so close to us, we can see the water being filtered through their bills. We returned to the beach and loaded back into the panga for transit back to the Letty. During lunch and after a short siesta, we motored down the western coastline of Santa Cruz to Dragon Hill. Once anchored offshore, we suited up for an afternoon snorkeling session along the cliffs and rocky shoreline. We observed at least 20 species of beautiful fish and corals before heading back to the pangas and then to the Letty to prepare for our afternoon outing.

Our goals for this outing were finding the Galapagos Land Iguana. With this dry landing, we walk right off the panga onto a small pad cut into a black lava flow extending out into the ocean. This lava flow is also a preferred location for hundreds of Marine Iguanas sun themselves here after climbing out of the surf to warm up in the hot sun. We walk carefully through the Iguanas as we unload. This afternoon was very hot, and the relentless equatorial sun beat down on us hard. We were prepared with proper clothing and lots of water and we carried on just fine, but we have a much better understanding of the harsh conditions that drive the plant and animal adaptations here in the Galapagos.

Finding the Land Iguanas turned out to be a not-so-difficult task here at the appropriately named Dragon Hill. Land Iguanas were active even the hot conditions of the afternoon sun. The large bright yellow male iguanas were either patrolling territories near their burrows or laying under the Opuntia cacti waiting for a fruit or cactus pad to fall off the cactus. Once this food hits the ground, they quickly walked or ran over to eating or de-spining, if needed. In the sandalwood forest nearby, we spotted another finch species, the Gray Warbler-Finch. It looks like any other warbler with its thin tweezer-like beak. We watched it jump from branch to branch, picking at leaves and gleaning crevasses in the bark of the trees just as any warbler would do. Our loop trail wound above



the coastal zone onto a breezy bluff overlooking the beach and we could see our ships waiting for us just offshore. We took a few minutes to rehydrate, then hiked back to the beach. The captain informed us at dinner that we would likely have red skies and perhaps a view of lava flowing out of the Wolf Volcano as we traveled overnight passing Isabela Island, closest to the volcano around midnight. Everyone agreed to be roused at midnight to view this natural spectacle and as we approached the region, the red reflection in the clouds increased in brightness. At the closest point, the captain stopped the boat for 20 minutes so we could experience and photograph the volcanic activity. The clouds over the island were glowing bright red and the nearly full moon was low on the horizon, but just above the clouds, making for incredible photo compositions. Three areas along the rim of the volcano were glowing with bright pools of lava. As the volcano originally erupted on January 7, 2022, it's been active for weeks now. Also at this viewing area, we were just north of the Equator as we cruised north around the tip of Isabela and head back south of the Equator several hours later. We will repeat this trip of crossing the equator, Isabela and Wolf Volcano in darkness when we return to Santa Cruz Island in a couple of days. Seven new species were added today including Woodpecker Finch, Galapagos Flycatcher, Medium Ground-Finch, and stunning close-up observations of American Flamingos.

Wed., Feb. 9 Punta Espinoza | Fernandina Island

We are anchored just off Fernandina Island of outside upon waking this morning. Some of the group were up early to witness the return of Swallow-tailed Gulls (nocturnal feeders) that were out feeding on squid in the darkness and are returning to roost as the sun comes up. Our first outing is a dry landing at Punta Espinoza, a low shelf lava shelf just a couple meters above sea level. We make our landing in a small Red Mangrove patch where young sea lions are playing and streak by us by our boat. A small trail through the mangroves lead up onto the lava flow that makes up Punta Espinoza. This point is made up of many smaller barren lava flows that have large areas of black sand deposited in between them. The only plants observed were small, sporadic groupings of Lava Cacti that looking like green and gold fingers sticking up out of the Lava. Some had 5 or 6 protruding and some had over 100. The lava flows here were a perfect example of rope lava, Pohoioi, as the Hawaiians would say. These deep hot sand deposits are also prime nesting locations for the Marine Iguanas, and we observed them here in great numbers. Male Iguanas jostled for territory on the rocks leading to the sand deposits and females were also piled up in great numbers, perhaps warming in the sun from their first underwater feeding of the day.

Dragon Hill Flightless Cormorants were here in good numbers as well. Many were in the water fishing and several that were already out feeding were now drying in the sun about 20 meters from the walking trail. Nearby, a pair of Galapagos Hawks perched on the highest lava flow searching for lava lizards and the only land



mammal on the Island, that Galapagos Rice Rat. Collections of bones that have washed up here included those of Pilot Whale, Sea Turtle, Galapagos Sea Lion, seabirds and mummified remains of the rice rat, their bleached white remains bright against the black fields of lava rock. We returned to the Letty gearing up for an early snorkel session off the pangas off of Fernandina Island. At this location, the water was clearest yet with about a 30-meter visibility. As we dropped off the pangas, we were immediately greeted by amazingly playful Galapagos Sea Lions that remained with us the entire snorkel session and often barged in if you were paying attention to another sea creature. One even tried to pull off a Marine Iguana we were filming off the rock it was feeding on. This must be a common occurrence here because the iguana didn't miss a bite, it just held on more tightly.

Flightless Cormorants made their way through the area, and we filmed several feedings underwater chasing small damsel fish from crevice to crevice. Their speed underwater, and their ability to follow the smallest of fishes through the coral was amazing and was the topic of conversation during dinner. We returned to the Letty, greeted with refreshments as usual, and showered up for lunch and our afternoon outing. During lunch and siesta, we motored from Fernandina Island to Urbina Bay on the Island of Isabela. Disembarking at Urbina Bay was a wet landing on a steep black sand beach. We walked over the black sand dune, careful not to step in any of the turtle nests covering the back side of the dune. Once inland, the terrain was flat and hot. We stopped to see our first specimen of poison apple tree. Soon a large Galapagos Tortoise (Isabela) emerged from the brush and began eating the ping pong ball sized fruit that had dropped to the ground. Delighted to see our first tortoise of the trip, we spent a great deal of time watching and photographing this individual. We left this tortoise to eat its apples in peace and moved down the trail only a short distance, entered the coastal scrub forest and encountered two more tortoises (a bit smaller than our first) in the middle of the path. While enjoying these tortoises, a Vermilion Flycatcher landed about 15 feet from our tortoises and began hawking for food. Common in the western US, they are uncommon here in the Galapagos and we were happy to add it to our trip list.

Back at the beach, the wind had picked up a bit while we were hiking and increased the surf a bit making for an adventurous departure on the pangas. Back on the Letty, we had time for a snack and a break before dinner. In the evening, we had our usual briefing and checklist session then enjoyed watching snorkeling videos from the day's snorkeling session. Four new birds added to day, but what amazing additions with Flightless Cormorant, Brujo Flycatcher, Green Warbler-Finch, and Galapagos Hawk!



Thurs., Feb. 10 Isabela Island | Tagus Cove | Darwin Lake

Today we explored Isabela Island. Our morning activity began with an extensive panga cruise through the mangrove coves along the coast of Elizabeth Bay. Coastal mangrove areas serve as nurseries and resting places for many fish we've been observing during our snorkeling sessions. As we slowly motored through the flat water, we spotted many sea turtles on the surface and even got to watch one bury itself in the mud for an extended resting session. Others wedge themselves in the labyrinth of Red Mangrove roots and stay in one place for hours. The Red Mangroves here were very mature with some boasting trunks 18" in diameter and growing over 30 meters in height. The large fallen mangroves were perfect ledges for Galapagos Sea Lions to escape the water and sun themselves in peace away from the shoreline.

In the more open waters of the lagoon, we observed Golden Cow-nosed and Spotted Eagle Rays gliding alongside our pangas. Large puffer fish also make their way into the lagoons to feed or spawn in the protected waters. Leaving the protected lagoon, we then cruised the shoreline in search of Galapagos Penguins and found a group of about 12 actively fishing just offshore. Our panga driver continuously positioned us, so the penguins pass nearby for viewing and photo opportunities. Galapagos Penguins were new for us today and we saw them at every location for the rest of the day. Having spent our morning on the pangas, we motored back to the Letty for lunch and a short relocation to Tagus Cove, also on the Island of Isabela. Amazingly, as we approached the Letty, we found ourselves right next to a bait ball of fish that was being pursued by Oceanic Black-tipped Sharks. Soon, Blue-footed Boobies and Magnificent Frigate Birds were also attracted to the boil of fish on the surface, and we found ourselves with front row seats to a feeding frenzy, sometimes right between our two pangas. Luckily, we were armed with our binoculars and cameras from our morning outing, and we had simply amazing views and captured photographs of this spectacle. Eventually, larger predatory fish, presumably Tuna, began working the bait ball from below and soon the ball of fish was broken up and the water returned to its deep, calm azure color. Though this entire event lasted not more than 3 minutes, we reminisced about it all through lunch, dinner and evening.



Our after-lunch activities included the opportunity to rest or participate in sea kayaking and paddle boarding along the shoreline of Tagus Cove. Paddling the shoreline gave the group some of the best looks at Brown Noddies and Swallow-tailed Gulls nesting near the waters edge. I was told sea horses were observed by some of the group, too. The late afternoon activity was either a hike to Darwin Lake and up to the top of a nearby cinder cones or an extended Panga ride along the shoreline for seabird photography and a glimpse of the last remaining habitat of the Mangrove Finch. Darwin Lake has uncertain origins, but today it's a hyper-saline lake (about 3 times saltier than the ocean). No waterfowl were observed on the lake today, but the hike was beautiful and a geologic wonderland as we hiked higher and higher on not-so-ancient volcanic cones and vents. Reaching the top, we enjoyed an exercise in silence as we listened to the wind and the calls of ground finches and Galapagos Mockingbirds in the coastal forest of Sandalwoods below. We return to the Letty for another great dinner featuring local cuisine and a special celebration with the crew that included a music surprise from the crew a bit of dancing before we reviewed our bird list for the day. Only one species was added today, but it was a doozy! GALAPAGOS PENGUIN!

Fri., Feb. 11

Rabida Flamingos | Santiago Island

Overnight, heading south from Isabela Island, we passed back over the equator for the sixth and last time this trip. It also happened to be about the time we passed by Wolf Volcano, too. This allowed us to enjoy the red glowing skies once again from the volcanic activity as we motored our way to Santiago Island. For those that stayed up late enough, as we continued south, there was a particular viewing angle that allowed us to see the streams of lava flowing down the sides of the volcano. This last morning, we woke up anchored just off Santiago Island at Egas Port. Our morning excursion consisted of hiking the rocky shoreline and through the lava fields along the shore. Here, huge ancient lava flows and tubes created a stunning shoreline. The many layers of rock, each with its own erosion rate, has created a great diversity of shoreline geology. The ancient lava tubes that once made their way to the ocean are now hollow, collapsed from gravity and the erosional forces of the Pacific Ocean. This created a rocky landscape full of tide pools, rock bridges, wave blow holes, and hollow ledges. It was one of the few mornings that we have some marine layer, and the thick white air adds a bit of surrealism to the surrounding landscape on this morning. We spent our morning photographing the many shorebirds working the tidal pools here. In fact, nearly all the shorebirds we listed for this trip are represented here - American Oyster Catchers, Ruddy Turnstones, Spotted Sandpiper, and many Semi-palmated Plovers, Whimbrels, Sanderlings, Wandering Tattlers, as well as all of our herons – Great Blue, Striated, and Yellow-crowned Night Herons. These birds were constantly moving from pool to pool to shoreline as we hiked throughout the rocky shoreline. We



had wonderful encounters with Galapagos Hawks here and we took many photos of them as they perched and hunted the rocky shoreline. This is also where we had a siting of the Galapagos endemic subspecies of the Yellow Scorpion (*Hadruroides maculatus*)

Back aboard the Letty, we motored during lunch to Rabidas Island. Rabidas is strikingly beautiful with its beaches, cliffs, and rocks a deep red color. Today's late afternoon hike took us into the interior of the island where we hiked the bluffs above the bay, we're anchored in. The bluff trails wind their way through a maze of tall Opuntias and it's here that we had our encounters with very cooperative Darwin's Cactus Finches. We watched them fly from cacti to cacti, plunging their large bills deep into the bright yellow flowers of the Opuntia cactus, emerging with a face full of yellow pollen. It was easy to see firsthand that this Cactus Finch is the major pollinator for this cactus species here. The serene beauty of the bright red rocks, green vegetation, and bright blue water was captivating, and we spent quite a bit of time photographing the beautiful landscapes in the early evening sun. Another wonderful day of birding with two new species added today, Common Cactus-Finch, and Spotted Sandpipers.

Sat., Feb. 12 Bartolome Island | Pinnacle Rock

Due to a logistical schedule change, today we were blessed with a surprise visit to Bartolome Island. This location is usually a stop on the Southern Island Route, and is famous for its stunning views, amazing geology, and volcanic activity. Bartolome has an extraordinary geologic landscape. There is very little soil and vegetation here and the volcanic rock appears as it was frozen in place while still oozing down the island. The lava flows look extremely fresh, and you can see every wrinkle that was created while the lava was cooling. It's been over a million years since it cooled but it looks like it just occurred yesterday. Soils that can be found here are incredibly thin and fragile, so our entire walk was elevated on a boardwalk to protect the soils and few plants that have managed to eke out a living here. From the top of the island to Pinnacle Rock we took in the most famous view in the Galapagos Islands. Here we gazed upon hundreds of volcanic cones popping up out of the landscape, turquoise waters in the shallow bay below, with the Letty anchored not far off. It was the perfect spot for our group photo for the trip. We remained up on the summit for 30 minutes taking in this striking landscape and viewing soaring seabirds near and far. We hiked back down the stairs and boardwalks to waiting pangas and headed back to the Letty for dinner. Two species added today, Barn Owl, and Cattle Egret.



Sun., Feb. 13 Lobos Island Departures

Sunday marked the end of our Galapagos Journey. We had time for one last excursion to Lobos Island, named for the Galapagos Sea Lion colony that resides there. Yes, Lobos means wolves in Spanish and locals here refer to Sea Lions as Sea Dogs, or Wolves. Originally, it was the Monk Seal that inhabited these islands, but they are now only found occasionally here. In addition to the Sea Lion colonies, this low flat island is the perfect breeding ground for petrels, shearwaters and plovers. We took our last photos of the island and returned to the Letty to prepare for our departure. No new species added today, but we had wonderful birding on Lobos and at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno.

Before leaving the Galapagos, we shopped for souvenirs before leaving for the airport in the small town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. At the airport, we said our goodbyes to our local guides, Carolina and Diego, and boarded our plane back to Quito for our connecting flights home or to our next adventure. Some of us continued our Ecuador experience with an additional trip to the Mindo Rainforest region.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Dan Donaldson - DD), Blue-footed Booby, Galapagos Tortoise (DD), Group Scenic (DD), Orange Flower (DD), Mountain-scape (DD), Sally Light Foot Crab (Pat Lueders), Magnificent Frigatebird (DD), Beach Scenic, San Cristobal Mockingbirds, Wander Tattler, Juvenile Boobies (DD), Genovesa Island, Brown-footed Booby (DD), NEEDS ID (DD), Short-eared owl, Cactus Finch on Prickly Pear Cactus, Group Viewing Flamingos (DD), Frigatebird in flight (DD), American Flamingo (DD), American Flamingoes (DD), Galapagos Flycatcher, Land Iguana, Group birding (DD), Sunset at Fernandina Island, Observing Whale Skeleton (DD), Flightless Cormorants (DD), Galapagos Sea Lions, Galapagos Tortoise, NEEDS ID (DD), Galapagos Penguin (DD), Dolphins (DD), Tagus Cove (DD), NEEDS ID (DD), Scenic (DD), Sea Lions x 2 (DD), NEEDS ID (DD), Scenic (DD), Galapagos Hawk (DD), Sunset (DD), Scenic (DD)