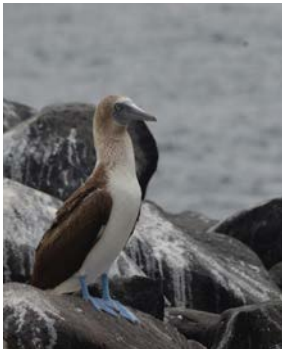


# Journey to the Galapagos | Trip Report

## November 6-13, 2022 | by Jon Atwood



With guide Jon Atwood, local experts Antonio Adrian & Karina Lopez, and participants: Carmen, Chris D, Chris H, Dave, Dottie, Virginia, Dusty, Javier, Jill, Jo, John, Lesa, Mike, Norty, Penny, Polly, Robin, Sheryl, and Summers



### Sun., Nov. 6

### Arrivals | Boarding the Letty

After arriving at the Isla San Cristobal airport, we were taken to the harbor where we boarded Zodiacs to board our expedition yacht, the Letty. Immediately we were seeing fantastic creatures - Galápagos sea lions, marine iguanas, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Elliot's Storm-Petrels and two Galapagos Petrels that showed us the distinctive flight behavior characteristic of the genus *Pterodroma*. We got settled in our cabins and were treated to the first of many delicious meals that we would enjoy during the next days. After lunch we had a short safety briefing, then we headed back to shore for a quick visit to La Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado, where we saw our first giant tortoises, including many young that were being raised in safety for later release into the wild. Returning to the Letty, we received a briefing about our activities for the following day and met the captain and crew at a cocktail reception. Later we took time to review our first day's wildlife observations, then sat down to an elegant multi-course dinner. What a great beginning!

### Mon., Nov. 7

### Cerro Brujo | Snorkeling

We began the day being fitted for wetsuits, snorkels, and face masks that we would use in the coming days to



explore a fantastic underwater world. For many of us snorkeling would be a new experience, one that would rival any wildlife watching experiences we had ever enjoyed on land! Next we headed for Cerro Brujo (Spanish for Wizard Hill). The site was, in fact, magical! Our Zodiac drivers took us deep into a rocky cleft called the Cathedral, where vertical cliffs soared 100s of feet above us. Spectacular. Exciting, too, were the creatures that surrounded us - sea lions, Sally Lightfoot crabs, Brown Pelicans, Blue-footed Boobies, Wandering Tattlers, and Galapagos Shearwaters. We exited our Zodiacs in our first “wet landing,” stepping onto a gorgeous coral beach where a pair of American Oystercatchers displayed for us. We took a short hike into an area used by nesting Red-footed Boobies – the rarest booby on the islands, and the only one to come in two color phases, mostly brown and mostly white. Nearly all the individuals we observed perched on straggly nests in low bushes next to the trail were in the mostly brown category. Although certainly it was fun to see their bright red feet, most of us found the pastel shading of their facial skin, which varied from pale blue to pink, to be this species’ most attractive character. Everywhere we looked we saw gorgeous scenery and appealing animals - the beauty and excitement almost overwhelming.

Back to the Letty for lunch! We never tired of the meals and treats we were served throughout each day! All delicious - whether vegetarians or omnivores, we were always satisfied. Following a brief siesta (a fine daily tradition that many of us considered taking home with us), we donned our wetsuits and set out for our first snorkel (or paddle board) experience in the waters near Punta Pitt. Schools of king angelfish and yellow-tailed surgeonfish swirled below us. If you remember the first time you ever enjoyed an early spring tree full of breeding-plumaged wood warblers - well, the shallow waters near Punta Pitt were at least that exciting, if not more so!

We returned to the Letty for our standard end-of-the-day experience: briefing about tomorrow’s activities, reviewing our day’s wildlife sightings, and a delicious dinner. We had really begun to understand why Isla San Cristobal’s major city, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, is often called the Capital of Paradise. As the boat left San Cristobal for our next destination, we all dreamt of tropical fish, diving boobies, and comical sea lions.





## **Tues., Nov. 8**

## **Exploring Punta Suarez | Endemics Galore!**

After traveling during the night, we awoke the following day at Punta Suarez on Isla Espanola. For many of us, this day proved to be one of the major highlights of our Galapagos adventure. We walked on a dusty trail through low vegetation where we saw Gray Warbler-Finch, Galapagos Doves, Espanola Mockingbird, Galapagos Hawk, and Espanola Ground-Finch. But while these endemic species were, of course, exciting to see, the real wildlife stars of the day were the seabirds, especially the Waved Albatrosses. With wingspans of about 7.5 feet, it is the only albatross to live exclusively in tropical latitudes. The nesting area we visited on Isla Espanola is the species' major stronghold – we saw dozens of adults, including pairs courting at nests, nests with half-grown, fluffy juveniles, and birds that we assumed were incubating eggs. Offshore we saw a flock of about 75 individuals loafing on the water. During incubation, birds have been tracked to foraging areas off the coast of Peru, while later in the breeding cycle most foraging is restricted to waters around the Galapagos Archipelago. Waved Albatrosses may live to 30-40 years of age. Fabulous, wonderful birds!

As we walked, we were careful not to step on the marine iguanas sunbathing on the dark lava rocks. Red-billed Tropicbirds, Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies, and Swallow-tailed Gulls (the only nocturnal gull in the world, which specializes in eating squid that come to the surface at night) were everywhere, along with the omnipresent frigatebirds soaring overhead. Isla Espanola was truly breathtaking. After returning to the Letty for lunch, followed by a welcome siesta, most of us put on our wetsuits and were taken to another fabulous snorkeling (or paddle-boarding or kayaking) spot near Gardner Bay. A white-powder sand beach was dotted with numbers of sea lions of all ages, and we never tired of watching – and photographing – these endearing mammals. Back to the Letty: briefing about tomorrow's activities, review of our day's wildlife sightings, and another delicious dinner. Each day has seemed impossibly perfect – what could we possibly expect for tomorrow?!

## **Wed., Nov. 9**

## **Isla Floreana | Galapagos Penguins | Post Office Bay**

Today we visited several sites on Isla Floreana, which, as one of the larger islands in the archipelago, has a higher elevation with a maximum altitude of about 2,100 ft. It arguably has the most complicated human history, including its use by whalers in the late 1700s, a penal colony in the mid-1800s, and was the site of several mysterious disappearances in the 1930s. Of all the Galapagos Islands, Isla Floreana is considered to be the most



altered by humans and their associated livestock (especially goats). Conservation efforts now focus on restoring populations of endemic species and educating the human population about sustainable methods of agriculture, solid waste management, and collection and filtering of drinking water.

Traveling by Zodiac toward Isla Floreana's Cormorant Point, we encountered a surprising seabird – not a Flightless Cormorant, which only live on Isla Isabella – but a Galapagos Penguin. Penguins are actually very good fliers, except that they do it under water, not in air. Arriving on Isla Floreana, we found two noticeably different types of beaches: green sand, with large amounts of olivine crystals, and white sand, composed of pulverized coral. We walked past a saline lagoon which often has a small flock of American Flamingos, but on the day of our visit, all but one had flown elsewhere. At least we were able to add it to our growing trip list! Also here were small numbers of Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers – reminders that despite being quite isolated, some of these long-distance North American migrants still call these islands “home” for the winter.

Returning to the Letty for lunch and siesta, we had two options for afternoon activities. Some opted for a wonderful snorkeling experience while others boarded a Zodiac to nearby Champion Island where one of the Galapagos' rarest songbirds, the Floreana Mockingbird, persists. Those who made the journey were rewarded when one popped up in response to our Ecoventura guide's playback. This bird is classified as Critically Endangered, with only about 150 individuals living on two small islands off Floreana. As habitat restoration on the larger island proceeds, hopefully there will be a future opportunity to reintroduce the species to its original home.

Later in the afternoon we landed at Isla Floreana's Post Office Bay where we participated in an interesting Galapagos tradition. This is the site where English whaling vessels established a “post office” barrel in the late 18th century. Letters left in the barrel would hopefully be picked up later by sailors from another vessel and delivered to the person “back home.” Some of us left cards addressed to friends and relatives – we'll see how many eventually reach their destination!





## Thurs., Nov. 10

## Puerto Ayora | Charles Darwin Research Center

We awoke this morning with a view completely different from the last few days: a busy harbor full of fishing boats and yachts at Puerto Ayora, Isla Santa Cruz, a town with a population of 12,000. Like Isla Floreana, Isla Santa Cruz has relatively high elevations (2,835 ft), and consequently hosts forested plant communities unlike any we had yet visited. First we explored a trail located near lava tunnels at El Mirador and Los Gemelos (the twins), and were rewarded with three of our most desired finch species: Woodpecker Finch, Vegetarian Finch, and Green Warbler-Finch. From there we were bused to Rancho Primicias, a privately-owned tortoise reserve where we had the opportunity to walk near these amazing creatures and enjoy several new birds including Small Ground-Finches, Galapagos Flycatchers, White-cheeked Pintails and Common Gallinules. Since all of our other destinations had been on property of the Galapagos National Park Service, which wisely has restricted visitors to established trails to protect animals and habitat, it was nice at Rancho Primicias to have more freedom to wander, explore, and have close “conversations” with huge Galapagos tortoises.

Later we visited the Charles Darwin Research Station where we learned the sad story of Lonesome George, the last representative of the tortoise population found on Isla Pinta. Biologists at the Darwin Center still hope to discover living tortoises that resemble George’s DNA, which potentially could be bred to closely approximate the Isla Pinta tortoise population. There is some hope as a 100-year-old tortoise named Diego, brought from the San Diego Zoo, has since fathered hundreds of offspring that are being cared for at the Darwin Center in preparation for reintroduction to the wild.

## Fri., Nov. 11

## Isla Bartolome | Black Turtle Cove

On Friday morning we awoke once again in near total isolation, having left the busy harbor of Puerto Ayora in the night. First we took a hike that wound to the top of Isla Bartolome, giving us a stunning, panoramic view. This is a very “new” landscape geologically, with bare lava and very little soil development and, consequently, very few plants. The only wildlife that we observed was one lava lizard, one Yellow Warbler (they’re usually everywhere), and several locusts. But everyone appreciated the spectacular view, one of the truly iconic images of the Galapagos, well worth the hike!

Snorkeling after our hike brought two surprises that we had not seen during our previous swims: an abundance of star fish on the sandy bottom, and Galapagos Penguins – up-close-and-personal. How delightful to be almost



nose-to-beak with these magnificent birds, the only species of penguin found north of the equator, where the cold waters of the Humboldt Current allow it to survive despite the tropical latitude. Back aboard the Letty that afternoon, we took Zodiac rides through Black Turtle Cove, a series of inlets surrounded by mangroves. Numerous green sea turtles accompanied us, and we found three species of herons: Great Blue Heron, Striated (Lava) Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. And abundant Yellow Warblers – this time in habitat more familiar to those of us who have birded in Mexico and Central America. A surprise was an Osprey that flew over one of the Zodiacs, reminding us that this widely-distributed raptor, which occurs on all continents except Antarctica, has no problem at all making long-distance overwater flights!

## **Sat., Nov. 12      Isla South Plaza | North Seymour Island**

Today we visited Isla South Plaza, a small islet with tall cliffs and a trail where we saw our first land iguanas as well as Swallow-tailed and Lava Gulls, lots of Red-billed Tropicbirds and Galapagos Shearwaters. This island's *Opuntia* (prickly pear) forest has woody trunks nearly a foot in diameter. Unfortunately, young plants that were reintroduced here had been decimated by invasive mammal species, and the success of ongoing restoration efforts remains uncertain. On the bright side, sea lions were everywhere, including several females that had just given birth, or were about to. One of our Ecoventura guides was excited to capture video footage recording a Brown Pelican as it gobbled down a sea lion placenta – certainly not an expected diet item for a pelican.

During lunch we relocated to North Seymour Island where we encountered an active breeding colony of frigatebirds. We walked along a trail that took us to within feet of these large and spectacular birds: males with their red gular sacs inflated, seeking to attract mates. The Galapagos Islands are home to both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds, and we were able to identify each of these species at this site.





Before dinner, we had a champagne toast with the captain and crew to celebrate a wonderful week, and our Ecoventura guides presented a terrific slide show that reminded us of all the amazing experiences we had enjoyed. This truly had been a week in paradise.

## Sun., Nov. 13 Departures

Today we left the Letty after breakfast – wondering a bit at how our luggage had seemed to expand during the week aboard. Returning to San Cristobal’s harbor, we had just enough time to visit the National Park’s Interpretation Center and buy some souvenirs in the local shops. We boarded our plane back to the mainland and carried with us memories that will last a lifetime.

*Galapagos Fur Seals (John Atwood - JA), Blue-footed Booby (JA), Assorted Fish (Karina Lopez - KL), Group on Zodiac (KL), Panoramic (Carmen Dumaua - CD), Seals on beach (CD), Assorted Fish 2 (KL), Birding the back deck (CD), Fur Seal along the path (CD), What a view! (CD), Waevd Albatross (JA), Boarding the zodiac (CD), Galapagos Penguin (JA), Group (CD), Galapagos Tortoise (JA), Gray Warbler-Finch (JA), Small Ground-Finch (JA), Espanola Ground-Finch (JA), Group Photo (KL), Posing with tortoise (CD), Land Iguana (CD), Snorkeling with Penguins (CD)*