

2012 Naturalist Journeys, LLC / Sunrise Birding, LLC

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Ecuador & Galapagos 2012

Nature and Birding Trip Report:

Greg Smith, Guide, with 15 participants: Penny, Toby, Maryellen, Elaine, Pat, Teri, Linda, Lois, RT, Kerry, Anne, Bob, Vicki, Donna and Heidi.
Local Galapagos guides: Rissell and Paul.

January 6 ~ 16, 2012



Friday January 6, 2012 ~ Arrival in Quito

The high clouds that inhabit Quito during January caused some of our groups to be delayed in travel, so it's a good thing Naturalist Journeys built in time to cope with this, planning for a day of exploring in Quito! Half of our group were rerouted, and had unexpected time to explore Guayaquil for a day, then barely making it to Quito for the start of the tour. They were met at the airport by Xavier Munoz of Neblina Forest and were in their rooms within thirty minutes at the Hotel Sebastian for a good night's rest.

Tomorrow was the start of something big. First a trip to the cloud forest and then a trip back in time where wildlife is still not afraid of people and the theory of evolution was initiated by a very non-secular man – Charles Darwin.

Saturday January 7, 2012 – Alambi & Bella Vista Cloud Forest

Even though some folks arrived late last night in Quito, we were ready to bird Ecuador's west slope cloud forests! At 7:15 we were met by Xavier Munoz of Neblina Forest, and Victor our driver, and together we headed out to Alambi and Bella Vista. It was time to bird!



Our first stop was at a steep-sided volcano that was no longer active. The crater floor was intensively farmed while the walls were primarily native vegetation. We were greeted by two species of swallows and then by watching blooming fuschias on the hillside we got to watch a stunning male Sparkling Violetear defend his little patch of earth! Walking back to the bus we found a

pair of Rufous-necked Brush Finches working the hillside. Nice start to a wonderfully sunny day!

Back on the bus, we stopped to take pictures of a very close immature Variable Hawk. And then onto the Equator Monument where most of us saw a Southern Yellow Grosbeak feeding with goats on a hillside. A Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle was the last bird we saw before heading into the clouds of the cloud forest...

Next was the Alambi Reserve hummingbird show. At least fifteen species were busy darting in and out of the feeders lined up about 10 – 20 feet away from us! From White-necked Jacobins to Purple-throated Woodstars, and Tawny-bellied Hermits to Andean Emeralds, it was a spectacular show!

Then the bananas got everyone's attention as a male Lemon-rumped Tanager showed up, along with Blue-Gray and Golden Tanagers. But wait, we also got to see a pair of Red-headed Barbets! Bob, Vicki, Teri, Pat, Donna and Heidi took the short walk down to



the water where the foliage was lush. Vicki saw a stunning Flame Orchid near the walkway. Then it was back to the bus.

As we climbed higher into the cloud forest, the clouds got thicker. And as they

grew thicker they got a little wetter and it started to rain. We pulled into Bella Vista and dashed under an overhang where, despite the deluge, we got great looks different hummingbird species including Violet-tailed Sylph.

But it was time for lunch and we all had some of the tastiest grilled trout in the clouds. It really was that good!

After watching the Masked Flower Piercers and Toucan Barbets forage in the trees, we took one last look at all the Buff-tailed Coronets bouncing in and out of the feeders. Then it was back on the bus for our trip back to Quito. Ah, Saturday afternoon in Quito and just enough time to stop at one of the mercados the city is known for...

Sunday January 8, 2012 – San Cristobal

We left the hotel at 6:30 a.m. and headed to the airport where we hopped onto our AeroGal flight to San Cristobal. We arrived by eleven-thirty and with our local guides Rissell and Paul we boarded the yacht Letty and learned the “do’s” and the



“shouldn’t do’s”. After that, the Captain fired up the engines and we motored towards Playa Ochoa. It was time to test our snorkeling skills at the beach to see how comfortable everyone was in the water. Some went in while others birded around the beach and got the Chatham (San Cristobal) Mockingbird – an island endemic.

Back on the ship we could see a large rock in the distance that looked like a sleeping lion or sphinx. And we were headed in that direction as Galapagos Shearwaters blasted by the yacht in groups of ten in that late-afternoon sweet light!

It wasn’t until we were within a mile of Kicker Rock that we realized this was one massive rock and a very thin pinnacle rock to the side. Lots of Nazca Boobies and frigatebirds circling above as the sun was setting in the west. We circled the rock and when we were on the east side we watched the full moon rise in the east – stunning! A very striking way to start our seven-day journey...

It was time for dinner and then bed as we were sailing to Genovese this evening. The captain invited different folks to dine with him each day; this first evening it was Bob for his birthday, Greg and his belated birthday and Peter and Susan James (UK) for their 30th anniversary.

Monday January 9, 2012 – Genovese (Tower)

YIKES! We awoke inside a caldera!!! Right where we were supposed to be and it was dawn. Our (hope) drill is to be the first group on shore in the morning and last group onshore in the afternoon.

Early morning found us climbing Prince Phillip’s stairs on our way to see boobies, owls and petrels. But along the way those recently fledged Nazca Boobies were putting on a show. Whining, begging, pleading for any kind of attention, but in the end they want to be fed. It is probably just like the frigatebirds, at this stage you have to fly to be fed.



Further along the trail we came to the land of no vegetation. Fields of ancient lava with fissures and cracks looking like a spider web gone wild! Darting in and out of these openings were thousands of

Galapagos Storm Petrels. Whirling in the sky like so many insects in a cloud, they were the chosen ones, the ones that the Short-eared Owls fed upon.

We saw five owls, some flying, but eventually they all ended up perched on the bluff in the midst of all the petrels. Although we didn't see any owl/petrel interactions, the petrels feed the owls and their young. It is that simple...

We made our way back down the stairs and slowly cruised by the bluffs watching flocks of Galapagos Shearwaters wheel in unison as they bisected our path. Mating gulls and the torrents of frigatebirds harassing boobies mercilessly, the walls were alive! RT and his giant lens got a workout photographing various birds including a life bird for RT, the Wandering Tattler.

Next it was time to get reacquainted with the water. Snorkels in hand, I mean mouth, and some were off (although a few of us went kayaking instead) ready to see if any sharks or other inhabitants were around. We chose a snorkeling route along the wall on the south side of the caldera where it dropped 600 meters, amazing!

We returned then for lunch and a siesta before our afternoon landing on Darwin's Beach.

We were met there by parading Swallow-tailed Gulls, which seemed to be wandering and making small talk. In the end we figured they were denying access to other gulls or telling us that there was a chick ahead. They use their extraordinarily large eyes to forage at night for their favorite food: squid (aka calamari).

Next were the Red-footed Boobies with their ostentatious feet. But it is their face and bill that steal the show. Subtle shades of pink, blue and mauve transform their otherwise brown or black and white bodies into a show of pastel hues! They are so understated...

Great Frigatebird chicks spend the day propped on their ridiculously small nests waiting for the next parent to arrive with a handout. For some, the parent won't return. It is their turn to feed themselves – fly and feed or wait and starve. The choice is theirs.



There were just so many wonderful sights and sounds on this little chunk of beach. Galapagos Sea Lions, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and more... And we had yet another opportunity to snorkel, this time in shallow water. Just a great place to hang out and enjoy this caldera in the Galapagos!



*Tuesday
January 10,
2012 ~
Isabella and
Fernandina
Island*

We awoke and were headed into a little bay where the British naval ship Tagus had once anchored in 1814.

As we approached Tagus we hopped in the dinghies and moved along the shoreline watching Brown Noddies cling to the vertical sea walls, Brown Pelicans sitting on nests with week's old young, and Galapagos Hawks soaring overhead. The yacht was anchored in Tagus Bay as we watched Galapagos Penguins and Flightless Cormorants surf along the base of the cliffs on the shore.



But we didn't stop at the yacht, but instead we started climbing the mile-long trail. And then there was the rock with graffiti in front of us. The oldest etched into the rocks was "St. George – 1836" (one year after Charles Darwin!!). Once the sea lions moved out of

our way we were able to get a little closer and see this lichen-covered rock that was once nothing more than graffiti and is now considered an historical artifact. Age is all it takes...

Then upward to a superb vista that showed lava flows laced with ribbons of green Palo Santo trees. We could see three of Isabela's massive volcanoes and all different stages of reclamation of their lava flows.

We came down from the trail around Darwin Lake and hopped in the dinghies and headed back to the yacht. Some went kayaking, (Greg and Toby; Linda and Lois) some went snorkeling, but whatever you did it was a perfect day! Those that went snorkeling saw a turtle here and a turtle there; you just never get tired of these epitomes of swimming dinosaurs! Always a treat!

Up came the anchor after lunch and we were off on a short thirty minute motor over to Fernandina. One of the youngest islands, it was full of lava and numerous animals found the shoreline the perfect place to forage and breed.

You step off of the dinghy and have to be careful not to step on a Marine Iguana or a



Lava Lizard. You wind your way through iguana logjams and then dodging Small Ground-Finches that are utilizing the jam session for gathering dead bits of skin.

Then come the sea lions passed out in

various positions and locations along the trail. Seeming to care about nothing but the sun and body functions, they lounge placidly wondering what to do next. Hundreds of Sally Lightfoot Crabs holding tenaciously to their piece of the rock as waves try to turn them into a bowling tournament. Wildlife was everywhere and the lighting was perfect for photography.

We had a sunset to catch so we returned in dinghies back to the yacht and got something to drink. Then we headed to the sky deck and saw a rainbow materialize over

Isabella. Oh, and then the virga (great opportunity to Google?) and the sunrays piling through the clouds. Just another perfect finish to another perfect day!!!!

Wednesday, January 11 – Santiago & Sombrero Chino

Our first stop on Isla Santiago was the black sand beach where apparently Adam took a bite of that poison apple from a tree on the shore. A now defunct salt port that went unregulated by a former president had left a few ruins and old fence posts. None of the artifacts of the past seemed to deter the wildlife of the island as there were numerous Marine Iguanas on the beach taking in the sunrise. Pat and Kerry walked up to see an old deteriorated homestead.

We walked up the bluff where we saw our first Galapagos Flycatcher. Everyone got a brief look at this handy little *Myiarchus*, but when the second one landed on my camera lens as I was about to take its picture, everyone got a great look! One landed on Heidi's



camera and Donna and others got photos.

Marine iguanas littered the rocks taking in the sunniest of positions. Their numbers were only eclipsed by the Sally Lightfoot Crabs, whose bright orange

carapaces sparkled against the black lava like gleaming stars in the night sky. A pair of nesting American Oystercatchers threw random calls at us as we passed by their nest.

An adult Striated Heron tried unsuccessfully to chase off a younger heron that was steadfastly holding onto to its small patch of lava. In the background an adult sea lion was tearing apart a small tuna/bonita. This



got the attention of a squadron of frigatebirds that came strafing in picking up bits of fish flesh that escaped the mouth of the sea lion. There was wildlife everywhere and oh so much activity. What a wild place...

After heading back to that black sand beach, we had some time left to snorkel. Yes, more turtles, plenty of fish and sea lions squeezing screams out of a few of us. The sun was out and it was another stunning day in the land of Darwin.

We yachted through lunch and headed to the other side of the island to find Sombrero Chino and the Bainbridge Rocks. Sombrero Chino is a short volcanic plug that finally was able to push a little magma to the surface. It left a squat pile of lava in the shape of a Chinese hat, hence Sombrero Chino!

Half of the group needed another snorkel, so they went off to see what the deep water would provide.

The rest did a hike along the coast where sea lion pups played in the shallows. Penguins chased prey and would occasionally bob to the surface as we made our way to a horde of marine iguanas busily spitting salt out of their nostrils. Sort of a salute to a horde of humans passing by...



We made our way back to our little white sand beach where we all went for a swim. Then it was time to board the yacht and head for the Bainbridge Rocks.

We didn't know what was in store until the Captain backed off of the engines and pointed the bow towards one of the rocks, actually a mini caldera. We were on the sky deck as he got to where we could see the caldera was filled with water. And as we scanned the lake we found eighteen Greater Flamingoes preening in the shallows as pink as they could be! What a totally cool sight!!!

After getting our fill, we motored towards Isla Bartolome. And that's when we found out Heidi wanted to celebrate her Tia Donna's birthday with margaritas for everyone. We had a splashing good celebration on the sky deck as we rounded the corner to see Pinnacle Rock jutting to the stars at sunset.

And right after our salmon dinner, Rissell put some music on and the Capitan danced with Donna, the birthday girl! Captain Victor also danced with Toby and with Penny. Paul danced with Maryellen and then with Anne. And then everyone was dancing, some with greater feats (pun intended) of elevation. It was a great birthday celebration!

Thursday, January 12 – Bartolome & Norte Seymour

Bartolome. Three hundred and sixty-some odd steps take us to the top of this dramatic volcanic hill that provides everyone with one of the most photographed sites in the Galapagos. For anyone who has watched the scene of the naturalist looking down on this view in “Master and Commander”, it is now indelibly etched in your mind! Stunning, and then there was the green sea turtle crawling ashore below to start a nest in the daylight hours.



For whatever reason, retracing our steps was so much easier the second time around. As we descended everyone was talking about the great day we were having, even though it was only three hours old.

Then we headed over to the beach where snorkeling with penguins was the latest fad. Not many of them, but there were enough that one would go zinging by you without the least provocation. Swarms of bubbles were expressed from their feathers as they dove



deep after their prey. A few eels, small rays and warm water made for great fish watching!

Back to the yacht, we had more to see and do. So after refueling at Baltra, we were off to Norte Seymour. Our landing was a little splashy, but we were all ashore

with one group heading off in one direction and the other group in the opposite direction. This was our first chance at seeing the marine iguana's cousin, the land iguana, and there were a number of them!

The Galapagos Land Iguanas on this island descended from captive stock, which Captain G. Allan Hancock translocated from Baltra Island to North Seymour Island in the 1930s.

There were lots of Magnificent Frigatebirds (lots!) nesting on this island and they were in all stages of development, from displaying males with their air-filled throat sack to mostly grown young sitting on their ridiculously small nests. It gave us all the opportunity to see a complete nesting cycle in one location.

Half of our group was incredibly fortunate to see a pair of Dark-billed Cuckoos in this



most unlikely location. All of us got to see Lava Lizards thermo-regulating on top of the very black female Marine Iguanas. Galapagos Sea Lions were very intent on their beach lounging while Blue-footed Boobies placidly looked

down and then up from their turquoise feet to the azure-colored sky. An absolutely gorgeous setting as we headed back to the yacht!

Friday, January 13 – Isla Santa Cruz

We awoke this morning at our anchorage in Puerto Ayora with different yachts around us. One of the biggest settlements in the Galapagos, this port serves as home to the Darwin Research Center and the base for the drive to the highlands where the giant tortoise reside!

After an early breakfast we boarded the pangas and headed to the new dock where we got on our bus that would take us to the highlands.

Our first stop was Los Gemelos (Spanish for the “The Twins”) a pair of large pit craters. The habitat here is very different than what we have been experiencing on the other islands. It is not that some of the other islands don't have this habitat, but this is the first time we are at this high an elevation, and in the clouds...

The mist keeps a lively array of lichens covering the trees and the lichens seem to have a myriad of insects. Every time we found a bird, whether it was a Warbler Finch or a Tree Finch, they were probing in the lichens. Even the Woodpecker Finch was doing a little lichen-looking.

We crossed the road to take a look at the other crater and that was where we got to see an incredibly bright male Vermilion Flycatcher. He was absolutely stunning in the morning light!

Next stop was the huge lava tube, but first we had to maneuver around giant



tortoises. There were two in the parking lot that had decided it was great place to thermoregulate. As we headed down the stairs, we spotted one of the few endemic mammals found on the islands, the Galapagos Rice Rat. He sat at the entrance to a burrow as we took a walk into the tunnel of dark. And it is dark in there...

Our final stop was the private finca (farm) that played host to lots of giant tortoises. There were tortoises in the water, tortoises grazing and tortoises strolling. It seemed that everywhere we looked we saw tortoises. One tortoise played host to a number of anis perched on its back. Think about pre-European utilization of the islands and how many tortoises must have roamed the islands. Even though we were seeing lots of them, their numbers must have been huge a couple of centuries ago.

We worked our way back to Puerto Ayora where all of us chose to eat lunch in town and explore the port. Lots of “shopopportunities” and everyone took advantage...

Teri rode a Galapagos version of a Yellow Cab back to the Letty. She took a yellow boat taxi that cost \$1 for the ride.

Saturday, January 14 – Isla Española

When we awoke in the morning we were anchored off of a small islet offshore of Isla Española. It was overcast, but not the least bit cool. We sat down to breakfast and started pondering our next life decision: deep water snorkel, shallow water snorkel or just wildlife watching along the beach. Tough decision, but we were up to it...

For those on the beach there were loads of sea lions and the Espanola Mockingbird – an island endemic. You would set your water bottle down and within seconds a mockingbird was pecking at the lid hoping to find a drop or two. That is why we were told to keep our bottles in our packs...

The sea lions were in small groups of no more than six, but they were everywhere. And like most wildlife in the Galapagos, they exhibited no fear or concern as we walked down the beach. Green Sea Turtles were mating just offshore. And different ray species were swimming very close to the beach. American Oystercatchers flew by in pairs and Warbler Finches seemed to be ubiquitous. Everywhere we looked, something was going on, and it really was a photographers dream.

We had one more stop, so we motored to another side of the island where we were going to look for those “neon” Marine Iguanas and the largest bird in the Galapagos, the Waved Albatross!

Just as we finished lunch we anchored outside of a small cove that would be our landing. It was mid-day so some were going to siesta, while others caught up on journals or birded. It was quiet when all of a sudden the word albatross worked its way through the yacht. For those not sleeping, a trip to the sundeck provided a distant view of a recently fledged Waved Albatross trying on its new wings. It would run across the water into the wind and get airborne for a bit before settling back on the ocean. Given the tenacity with which this bird was trying, it is probably now somewhere off of the coast of Peru and Chile!



We made our landing onto steps littered with those neon iguanas! The males are gorgeous with their turquoise bodies outlined in holiday red. And they are everywhere as we made our way through a path of scattered xmas decorations.

It did take a while to finish getting the perfect photograph of the iguanas, but we did and then split into two groups headed out to a point where the albatross nest.

We stopped and looked at two different species of nesting boobies, Nazca and Blue-footed, both with young of all ages. It seemed though, that the cacophony was of adults making noise at one another in defense of their patch of real estate. While this was going on, Red-billed Tropicbirds screamed at each other as threesomes careened through the sky!



And then it happened, the sky darkened as the shadow of the largest bird in the islands glided by us. An adult albatross!!! It was only a brief view, but there was hopefully more to come.



We climbed out of a small arroyo and were standing on the edge of a flat plateau that was littered with chunks of lava about the size of watermelons. This was the land of the Waved Albatross. It

was the end of the nesting season, but there should be some soon-to-be-fledged young somewhere in here.

And there they were! Eight fully-grown young with vestiges of down that once covered their bodies. We just had to stand there and watch them flap their wings in preparation of their first flight as a while below us a blow hole repeatedly filled with water and exploded. And then the sky darkened again.

An adult circled twice overhead and then proceeded to land about 70-feet from us. And when it did, one of those eight chicks came waddling over and with a little bill prompting had dinner! It was just so cool!

But that wasn't the end. We walked around the point and were confronted by a Galapagos Hawk sitting on a sea stack eating a small seabird chick (Swallow-tailed Gull?) of some sort. And then more adult Waved Albatrosses came floating by. What a great way to finish our final full day in the land of Charles Darwin!



Sunday, January 15 – Isla San Cristobal

On rising, Elaine got a photo of a Galapagos Sea lion in the dinghy right outside her door. Then the crew had to shoo it away since we needed to use the dinghy to get back to the dock. When we awoke we were back in the harbor where our journey began. After getting our bags packed and having breakfast, we headed ashore and to a local museum that shared information on the cultural and historical background of the islands. The vignettes of early colonization made all of us aware of how lucky we were to still have these islands available to explore. Paul encouraged us to read the history of Floreana where he grew up. (with just 20 residents when he was there; he said the population is now 100).

Rissell who grew up on San Cristobal was pleasantly surprised to find 5 of us in his family's bakery that turned 90 years old this year.

We all took a walk down the malecon before heading to the airport for our flight back to Quito. And when we arrived in Quito, we realized that maybe this was not the shorts weather we had been experiencing in the Pacific!

Xavier joined us for our farewell dinner at La Ronda where we were entertained by local musicians and dancers. We celebrated another birthday: the twins: Linda and Lois! It really was a nice way to spend our last evening together...

Monday, January 16 – Flights Home

Dawn crept into the rooms just before our wake up call. Those crepuscular hours when all is quiet, but all heck is going to break out in the next minute. Yes, we had to get up at all sorts of time to catch our flights home. Quito was waking up too as we headed to Mariscal Sucre Airport for our flights home.



Waiting at home for Greg...

Until the next adventure,

*Greg Smith, author and photographer,
with contributions from Pat Owens of Naturalist Journeys, LLC*