

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 – 27 December 2014



Galapagos Flightless Cormorant



Galapagos Hawk



Green Turtle

Report & images kindly compiled by tour participant David Griffiths



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Day 1

Monday 8th December

It was an early start for most of the group, with flights from Heathrow to Quito either via Amsterdam or Madrid. Philip had flown out a day early, and spent some of the day birding in the park area and botanical gardens near to our hotel, in the modern sector of Quito. Both flights arrived safely, and the Iberia flight was even 30 minutes ahead of schedule. After immigration and customs, we were met, and transferred to the Hotel Dann Carlton, close to the old centre of Quito, followed by a very early night for most of us.

Day 2

Tuesday 9th December

Most of the group were up very early, as a result of the five hour time difference, indulging in a very welcome breakfast, and even a pre-excursion walk to recce the nearby park. At 9am, we were off on a cultural excursion around old Quito, followed by a well-deserved lunch. The plan, for some, was to visit the park and nearby botanical gardens. Virtually the whole group succumbed to temptation, and experienced a worthwhile visit, with a wealth of native plants and flowers and a decent array of birds. Notable were the ever-moving hummingbirds, including Black-tailed Trainbearers and Sparkling Violetears, several flycatchers, Cinereous Conebill, Rusty Flowerpiercer, a migrant Swainson's Thrush and innumerable Great Thrushes.

Day 3

Wednesday 10th December

An early start, and we returned to the airport for our flight to Baltra Island (South Seymour). We had a smooth transition through the quarantine-type procedures, which aim to prevent non-native species from crossing over to the islands, check-in, followed by a short wait and an on-time TAME departure via Guayaquil. We arrived in Baltra on time, and were soon met by Darwin, and so we set off on our incredible journey. Weather - perfect.

We crossed the Ithabaca Channel to Santa Cruz Island - a short hop but, even then, it was evident that this was something special. At the ferry, we saw prospecting Small Ground Finches; in the channel, Blue-footed Boobies, Brown Pelicans, our first Elliot's Storm Petrel and even a swimming Marine Iguana. Things just got better after that: Medium and Small Ground Finches and the oft-criticised Smooth-billed Anis greeted us, whilst our first Lava Gulls and Magnificent Frigatebirds made the most of harassing a nearby fisherman trying to land his catch. Oh, and the omnipresent Yellow Warblers. With this species, it became a bit of a game to make sure we found at least one each day - it was never going to be a difficult task!

Having sorted our luggage, the main baggage going off to the Cachalote, our schooner, we were off and driving south through Baltra towards the highlands, watching the scenery changing rapidly from dry scrub through to lush almost rainforest woodlands, with ferns and orchids evident. Our target was El Chato Farm, lunch and some time exploring the surrounding open woodland, and getting to grips with the Santa Cruz Giant Tortoises which are common on the approach to the farm, and almost everywhere you care to look. After a very pleasant lunch, a short walk revealed hundreds of Small Ground Finches and the odd Warbler Finch. A small pond held Common Gallinules (much debate about Moorhens) and several White-cheeked Pintail. Anis abounded, as well as Cattle Egrets - widespread, recent colonisers - and our first Galapagos Mockingbirds and Galapagos Flycatchers.

We continued our drive south to Puerto Ayora, the main town on the Galapagos, and a visit to the Charles Darwin Research Station and the Giant Tortoise Breeding Project. Here we witnessed the various stages of ensuring that tortoises can be released in the wild, when they reach a reasonable size. In addition, there are enclosures with several large Land Iguanas, and we were also able to observe several Painted Locusts, West and Central Lava Lizards, and watch Cactus Finches feeding on the flowers of their favourite food - cacti. Time was quickly passing by, and next was a slow walk through the town and down to the jetty, to meet up with the Pangas that would transport us to the Cachalote. En route was the small fish market - a hive of activity as small boats offloaded their catch, and various birds attempted to steal a free meal or waited for the offal. There were more Lava Gulls, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds and even two Lava Herons, quickly darting in for scraps.

At about 6.30pm, we embarked on Cachalote, had dinner and sorted out our baggage and kit, for an early morning departure to South Plaza Island.

Day 4

Thursday 11th December

We awoke to a cool but bright morning, anchored off South Plaza Island, and surrounded by a multitude of birds – thousands of Galapagos Shearwaters, Swallow-tailed Gulls, Brown Noddies and Magnificent Frigatebirds. We set off by panga to South Plaza, and a circuit of the island, via a dry landing and straight into the realm of Land Iguanas and nesting Swallow-tailed Gulls. The temperature started to climb, but this was to be a slow and enjoyable walk, heading to the northern cliffs and a circuit through sparse, cactus dominated vegetation, with volcanic rock and wildlife everywhere.

Highlights included incredible views of seabirds as we looked down from the cliffs (Galapagos Shearwaters predominating, but also Blue-footed Boobies and our first Nazca Boobies, and Brown Noddies). Evidence of predatory Galapagos Short-eared Owls was found in the form of many disembodied wings of petrels, scattered around the paths on our way to the sea cliffs. Many more Marine Iguanas, Galapagos Sealions high on the cliffs,

and Wandering Tattler kept us entertained. Our route back to the landing stage produced both Small Ground Finches and Cactus Finches, and some endearing Santa Fe Land Iguanas destroying a cactus plant. More Wandering Tattlers, Ruddy Turnstones and Lava Gulls graced the rocky shore.

On our return to Cachalote, we up anchored and motored off to Santa Fe Island through calm seas, with blue skies and a pleasant breeze, taking the opportunity to chill out and watch the world go by from the upper deck. Our short cruise produced breaching Oceanic Sunfish, two Galapagos Petrels and both Elliot's and Galapagos Storm Petrels. The star for most, though, was the Waved Albatross that slowly travelled towards us along our wake, before shooting off ahead of us and disappearing from view. A taste of things to come.

On arrival at Santa Fe we anchored outside the volcanic reef, lunched, relaxed, and then we were off for the first of several snorkelling expeditions. Inside the reef the waters were quite calm, and we got to grips with a wealth of fish species, including our first encounters with Whitetip Reef Sharks.

At 3pm, with the temperature now a cooling 28-30°C, it was off to explore and experience a wet beach landing amongst Galapagos Sealions and feeding Wandering Tattler. A gorgeous sandy beach led off into giant *Opuntia* Cactus forest but, first, most took the opportunity to get close to a juvenile Galapagos Hawk, which was posing for photographs near the landing, soon followed up by a showy Galapagos Dove. Santa Fe Land Iguanas were quickly found, in addition to more Lava Lizards and some showy Marine Iguanas, which you usually have to be careful of, to avoid treading on them. Our short time ashore ended, and it was back to the pangas, re-embarkation and up anchor after dinner, for a night time flit to our next island.

Day 5

Friday 12th December

Having sailed at 1am, it was good to hear the anchor dropping just as dawn broke, and we were soon up on deck, for a first look at another island. We were anchored off San Cristobal Island in Cerro Brujo bay and, after a hearty breakfast (they were all hearty and an excellent set up for a morning's adventure), it was off to the beach where the usual suspects in the form of Galapagos Sealions were evident, and we soon caught up with Chatham Mockingbirds. A slow beach walk revealed American Oystercatchers, with one of the adults trying to feed a ghost crab to a recently hatched youngster. After snorkelling from the beach, amongst a myriad of fish species, we re-embarked for the sail around the island to El Junco Lagoon.

Disembarking at Puerto Chino, we took a coach through the greening countryside, with the weather changing from the very pleasant dry 30°C to a misty/drizzly/wet 20°C. Not at all fazed, we took the boardwalk up to the viewpoint overlooking El Junco Lagoon, where Darwin spent some time explaining what we should be able to see, if it were not for the swirling mists and drizzle. Still, we could at least hear Common Gallinules! The crater was totally enshrouded, and even a descent to the lagoon only confirmed how bad the visibility was. The descent back to town took us back to the warmth of civilisation, where ice creams seemed to be the order of the day along with sunhats, tea towels (Marion) and postcards. A walk along the sea front turned up more Sealions, Marine Iguanas, Ruddy Turnstones and Lava Herons. Then off back to Cachalote, dinner and a 9pm departure for Espanola.

Day 6

Saturday 13th December

Espanola (Hood) Island is the oldest in the Galapagos. Our first stop was Gardner Bay, where the antics of Hood Mockingbirds had to be seen to be believed. No water bottle was safe, as these charming birds sought out a drink. No luck though, as Darwin had briefed us on the etiquette of no engagement. This was also a key site for Large Cactus Finch and, after some hard work, we found a male busy feeding on small seeds – there are no cacti on the island. Several Galapagos Hawks were present, as well as Yellow-crowned Night Herons and Galapagos Flycatchers.

After lunch we moved to Punta Suarez, where we took the cliff-top walk, first through a colony of Nazca Boobies, many of which were on eggs, then past Blue-footed Boobies and nesting Swallow-tailed Gulls, towards the Waved Albatross colony. It was getting towards the end of the breeding season, but there were still about 20 well-developed young around, in addition to a handful of adults. The young were in very weird plumage, and provided a considerable amount of entertainment with wing stretching and flapping. There were a few birds around that looked as though they were ready to leave and, more worryingly, some which looked as though they might not make it off the island. We also had good views of a perched Galapagos Hawk, several birds hunting and several Grey Warbler Finches. We stayed anchored until 9pm, with attendant Galapagos Shearwaters, Elliot's and Galapagos Storm Petrels. Next stop, Floreana.

Day 7

Sunday 14th December

We were anchored near the Devil's Crown off the island of Floreana, the remnants of a volcanic cone, long eroded by the sea and winds. Our first stop after breakfast was Cormorant Point; the weather was unexpectedly rainy and heavy with cloud, but still a warm 26 - 28°C. We walked from the sandy beach, looking out over the lagoon and spotting our first flock of American Flamingos, some 17 strong but with only a single juvenile present. Also present were White-cheeked Pintails and a single Grey Plover. At the far end of our walk was another white, sandy beach which tempted us to paddle, but Darwin quickly pointed out the myriad stingrays (Eagle Rays) present in even the most shallow of areas! Also present, and in the throes of mating, were several Green Turtles, one of which almost got out of the water, despite our presence.

Before lunch, several of us took the opportunity to go snorkelling off and in the caldera of the Devil's Crown. Getting into the water from the panga was easy and, before we knew it, we were in an underwater haven. Two giant Manta Rays sped off away from us, Green Turtles and Galapagos Sealions abounded, and one or two Whitetip Reef Sharks added to the excitement. The list of fish species got longer and longer for Peter and Jan, our fish experts.

After lunch we landed at Post Office Bay to see the famous post box. We sorted through the piles of postcards to see if there were any addressed to someone near where we lived, and added our pile to the cache. We had friends from New Zealand arriving in the islands in early January and left a card for them, and they were amazed when they too looked through, and found a card which had got to them far quicker than by the conventional route!

Then we arrived at the small town and port of Puerto Velasco Ibarra, where we boarded our converted truck for a journey through very dry and dusty countryside, up to the green and verdant Asilo de la Paz. Our main quest

was for Medium Tree Finch, found only on Floreana, and we soon had our target bird along with the usual Yellow Warblers. Later on, we encountered Small Tree Finches, and Darwin and Jacqui were treated to a scooter-ride by Galapagos Rail, as one rapidly crossed the track in front of them. Back at the port, we re-embarked whilst Darwin stayed to sort out payment for our ride into the highlands. He then saw the first of the many Galapagos Penguins of the tour.

Day 8

Monday 15th December

After a fairly long, overnight sea crossing, we arrived at the north-west end of Santa Cruz Island around 6am. Our morning activity took us to Cerro Dragon, where we eventually landed, after a photo-opportunity with a young Galapagos Penguin. Wandering Tattlers were on the beach, and we moved off inland to view a small lagoon with Grey Plover, Mexican Stilts and about 10 Western Sandpipers. Our walk through the very dry landscape brought us several Large Ground Finches as well as the commoner Small and Medium billed variety. A fleeting Vegetarian Finch added to our tally.

Snorkelling today was off the lava flows near to where we'd encountered our penguin, and a highlight was watching these endearing birds "flying" underwater.

After lunch it was up anchor, and a short cruise across to Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island. Sullivan Bay leads on to masses of un-eroded black lava, which has resulted from recent eruptions, and has excellent examples of multi-coloured lava bubbles, tubes and even lava moulds of destroyed trees. Lava cacti erupt in a few places, where vegetation and life is very sparse. Painted Locusts however abounded, and there were visiting Galapagos Doves. The main thing that will stick in the memory, though, was the 33°C and the humidity!

Day 9

Tuesday 16th December

At Genovesa (Tower); we awoke at anchor inside the caldera, to what was to be a dry and hot day - 35°C+. Our first memories are of the numbers of Red-footed Boobies, dozens of which perched on the rigging or flew off to fish, away from the island. The sheer cliffs held Great Frigatebirds, Nazca Boobies and Swallow-tailed Gulls, and we were keen to land and explore. We climbed Prince Philip Steps, having encountered our first Galapagos Fur Seals en route, and into the Red-footed Booby colony. One of the non-avian highlights was several Genovesa subspecies of Marine Iguanas, as we walked through the Great Frigatebird colony, noting the subtle plumage differences which distinguish Great from Magnificent Frigatebirds. Reaching the sea cliffs, we saw spectacular numbers of Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels, numbering in their thousands, and soon caught up with one of their key predators. Two Galapagos Short-eared Owls were sitting motionless and very well camouflaged against the lava. A single Lava Heron also did a good job at trying to hide. Sharp-beaked Ground Finches fed contentedly only feet away from us.

Snorkelling off the cliffs before lunch was aimed at looking particularly for Hammerheads. In the lee of the cliffs, the water plummets and it was sort of exhilarating, trying to keep an all-round look for sharks. One Galapagos Shark was seen briefly but did not linger, unlike the now expected Green Turtles.

After lunch, we managed to get ashore an hour earlier than planned. The occupants of another boat at anchor were going snorkelling, so we took their “slot” for landing, and were off to the rather inappropriately named Darwin’s Bay (Charles never made it to Hood). Maybe it was named after “our” Darwin?

We had a wet landing on a pristine white sandy beach and then a dilemma – where to look first. Sea Lions, Iguanas, breeding plumaged Great Frigatebirds, and then waders: Wandering Tattler, Turnstones and Hudsonian Whimbrel, followed by spectacular views of Red-footed Boobies, including white-morph adults, then extreme close ups of male and female Large Ground Finches. What a bill! Our walk continued through areas covered in Boobies and frigatebirds, and soon we were looking into the nesting cavity where an adult Red-billed Tropicbird could just about be seen, along with a young chick. Several Yellow-crowned Night Herons were at roost on the lava, as well as a good number of Swallow-tailed Gulls, many with well-developed young.

Having landed early we were able to up anchor and start a longish sail down to Santa Cruz and Puerto Ayora. This meant several hours of daylight at sea, and we were able to enjoy the sunshine on the upper decks, and a good clutch of seabirds including Galapagos Shearwaters, along with Elliot’s and Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels and hundreds of Red Necked Phalaropes. We crossed the “line” (actually for the second time – the first being in the early hours of the morning) and, along with the Captain, watched the GPS slowly move to 00:00:00 Latitude.

Day 10

Wednesday 17th December

Having arrived at Puerto Ayora sometime after midnight, we got to catch up on sleep, before breakfast at 7am, and disembarking for our bus journey into the interior. Some of the route was very familiar to us, as we ascended into the highlands towards the sink holes which lie either side of the road at Santa Rosa. We were on a mission to catch up with several species of Darwin’s Finches that had so far eluded us. Around the walk we picked up some regulars – Galapagos Dove, Galapagos Flycatcher and Small Ground Finches. Small Tree Finches were next, and then we found ourselves in an area where it all happened. A single Large Tree Finch was watched feeding, and then Common Cactus Finches, and Small and Medium Ground Finches seemed to abound in a mixed flock of 100+ birds. Several Green Warbler Finches revealed themselves, and then Darwin managed to find the first Woodpecker Finch. Unfortunately none of us managed to see it!

We then travelled back towards the farm where we’d had lunch on our first day on the islands, only to stop in the middle of nowhere, and Darwin explained we were going “owling”. Our quest was to find Galapagos Barn Owl in the lava tubes. There was no sign in the first tube, but success in the second where, in the gloom, we could pick out an adult and an immature bird. An excellent result.

We headed off to El Manzanilla Farm for a very pleasant lunch, complete with a feisty cocktail of alcohol plus a very sour locally pressed orange juice: a remarkably pleasant combination. The pool next to the restaurant held nearly 30 Common Gallinules and a couple of White-cheeked Pintail. Watching a Magnificent Frigatebird, coming down to bathe and drink, was rather strange in the middle of the highlands and forest. A walk along the track was well worth the effort after a large lunch. A Monarch Butterfly entertained us, and then we were back looking for finches. Vegetarian Finches were quick to reveal themselves and then, at last, a Woodpecker Finch. However the finch only stayed around long enough for three of us to see it, before it was off into the trees.

Our final stop was at Media Luna where Galapagos Petrel breeds (not at this time of year though). We heard, but could not see, at least four Paint-billed Crakes, and Jim watched and photographed a hunting Galapagos Short-eared Owl.

Before we returned to Cachalote, there was an opportunity to explore the town or try some birding at German's Beach. A few of us took the latter opportunity, and enjoyed close-ups of White-cheeked Pintail feeding amongst the swimmers, several Mexican Stilts, Hudsonian Whimbrel and Semipalmated Plover. Hundreds of Cattle Egrets moved to roost, and a Lava Heron fished for its supper.

Day 11

Thursday 18th December

We sailed at 1am for Chinese Hat (Sombrero Chino). This is a small, volcanic island off the tip of Isla Santiago (James Island) and, from our anchorage site, it fitted the description well. It was quite dull and overcast when we set off but, as usual, the temperature defied the view, and was quite pleasant at about 26-28°C. Galapagos Penguins were seen early on, along with Common Noddies and Galapagos Mockingbirds which seemed to follow us around. A Galapagos Racer Snake was seen by those taking up the rearguard, as we strolled around. We watched American Oystercatchers feeding, along with Wandering Tattler and Lava Heron, and then watched amazed as a Great Blue Heron caught, struggled with and eventually consumed a fish, which would probably have seen half a dozen people happy with a portion each. What an expanding neck!

After some of us indulged in snorkelling, we up anchored after lunch and, with the conditions right for sailing, assembled on the upper foredeck, and watched our sailors prepare Cachalote for a very bracing and exiting three hours under sail to Rabida. This was a stimulating experience, with the schooner heeling over to starboard some 30° as we "hurtled" along. Birding became challenging, but you soon got used to walking (??) around the deck. Two Galapagos Petrels put in a close pass, but try photographing fast moving seabirds on a canted deck! We passed through flocks of Galapagos Shearwaters hundreds or thousands strong, had three species of Storm Petrels as well as both Frigatebird species in our wake, and many Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies.

Our sailing time passed quickly and soon we arrived at Rabida Island (Jervis) where we went ashore on a dark red coral beach. The lagoon was pretty barren, the impacts of a previous El Nino and over use by Galapagos Sealions having impacted on water quality. We walked up a track to get amazing views of clear blue waters, fishing Boobies and Noddies, and several large and menacing Galapagos Sharks. The nearby shrubs were a possible site for Vermillion Flycatcher, a species Darwin was keen for us to catch up with. Not today though! We re-embarked and set off for Isabela.

Day 12

Friday 19th December

We awoke to a dull and cool day at sea level and, after another hearty breakfast, disembarked for the short ride to Puerto Villamil, the main settlement on this, the largest of the Galapagos Islands. On the way, we spotted six Galapagos Penguins out on some rocks and the usual Blue-footed Boobies and Frigatebirds. At the landing stage were the usual suspects, in the form of Galapagos Sealions, as well as both Lava and Striated Herons, enabling a good comparison to be made between the two species.

We took a converted truck up to the highlands, passing through various vegetation zones, and up into a cool 18°C, drizzly and very overcast landscape. We set off for a walk up the track leading to the crater. Things started off well, with a Woodpecker Finch feeding on the ground with other finches, good views of Small Tree and Green Warbler Finch, and then got even better. Darwin had spotted some movement in the vegetation next to the path and we managed glimpses of a Galapagos Rail, slinking away from us. We persisted with the walk, although by now it was raining quite heavily. It was worth it – ahead of us, bathing in a large puddle were TWO Galapagos Rails. We were able to approach quite closely, and get some decent photographs before they too slunk away. We soon decided that the rain was beating us, and abandoned the walk and retreated back to the bus. It was not all in vain though, as when we were getting sorted for our return Darwin called us over to one of the wooden shelters where we saw a splendid but rather wet male Vermillion Flycatcher. Darwin was happy as this was one of his favourites, and a bird in decline on the islands.

On the return to the town, we pulled off the “main road” to what looked like a cement works and a disused gravel pit that now held a party of bright red American Flamingos. We got close-up views as they fed alongside Common Gallinules and White-cheeked Pintails.

After lunch we had an opportunity to visit Puerto Villamill. We walked through the town, with three areas of interest to look for wildlife: the beach, the lagoon behind the town and the series of lagoons near the tortoise breeding station to the west of the town.

The latter are mangrove-fringed pools with a good boardwalk, where we got close to Mexican Stilts, Hudsonian Whimbrel and White-cheeked Pintail. And of course Yellow Warblers! Our walk back towards the town, along the beach, yielded several confiding Wandering Tattlers, Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderling.

At Muro de las Lagrimas, there were only a couple of flamingos present; however, it was the presence of several wader species that proved of greater interest. First were Semipalmated Sandpipers, a single Least Sandpiper and Semipalmated Plovers, then in flew a Greater Yellowlegs and several Hudsonian Whimbrels. Then it was back to the jetty, where we caught up with our crew who’d been playing football against the crew of one of the other boats.

Day 13

Saturday 20th December

We sailed early morning for Moreno Point an area of pristine lava landscapes. Whilst on our pangas, our attention was quickly drawn to our first Flightless Cormorant, fishing some distance from shore. Pangas were rapidly diverted for closer views, before we continued on to the rocky, mangrove-lined shoreline and more of these delightful birds. The lava landscape is only just developing plant life, thousands of years after being laid down, with lava cacti and some grasses being evident. What’s special about this area, though, is the presence of brackish lagoons, which are now well-vegetated with reeds and small shrubs. Common Gallinules, American Flamingos and White-cheeked Pintails were present. Back at the landing point, we had an interesting time raising the Cachalote on the radio to get us back, and had to call another, nearer boat and get them to pass on the message. We used the time to explore and watch Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Marine Iguanas and Lava Herons.

After lunch we motored to Elizabeth Bay, an area of dense Red, White and Black Mangroves in small, secluded bays. First we stopped at a rocky outcrop for exceptionally close up views of Blue-footed Boobies, before

entering the calm of the mangroves. The temperature was a very warm 34-36°C and, as we glided quietly around the coves, we made the most of the time spent in the shade. The quiet was remarkable, and the noise of the birds was all that you could hear as our crew rowed us slowly around. We saw several Striated Herons of differing ages, Lava and Great Blue Herons and some very large Marine Iguanas. One remarkable cove held several Green Turtles, which appeared to be resting up just inside the mangroves, allowing excellent photo opportunities. Before leaving the coves, Darwin then tasked us with finding Galapagos Sealions, which have taken to resting on the larger branches of the mangroves. We found several, with some difficulty, as they were remarkably well camouflaged in the trees.

We stopped at the same rocky outcrop where we'd seen the Blue-footed Boobies on the way to the coves. This time it was the motley collection of Boobies, Galapagos Penguins, Flightless Cormorants and Magnificent Frigatebirds which demanded attention. The light was perfect, and we lingered for a long time getting shot after shot of these birds, before eventually getting back to the Cachalote, for a night at anchor and a good, long sleep after dinner.

Day 14

Sunday 21st December

From Elizabeth Bay, it took only a couple of hours to cruise to our next port of call, Urbina Bay. This bay, and the landscape beyond, is noted for the incredible uplift from the sea in 1954. We landed on a beautiful sandy beach and immersed ourselves in the wildlife, as Darwin explained the uplift and the presence of evidence in the form of shells and coral far inland. Whilst watching various Darwin's Finches and Galapagos Mockingbirds, we noted a different mockingbird type flying towards us, pursued by Smooth-billed Anis. It was obviously a Dark-billed Cuckoo; it quickly dropped out of sight, but was soon relocated, and was seen by most of the group before disappearing.

Our walk took us through dry shrubby Palo Santo trees abounding in several species of finches, with the usual Yellow Warblers and a couple of fly-over Galapagos Hawks. A major highlight was the presence of a single Giant Tortoise of the *alcedo* sub species, and a couple of large and bright Galapagos Land Iguanas.

A short sail after lunch, along the west coast of Isabela, gave us another opportunity for seawatching, and we were all on lookout for cetaceans. None seen today, but there was plenty of interest from seabirds, including hundreds of Galapagos Shearwaters, Elliot's Storm Petrels, Blue-footed and Nazca Boobies. Our journey took us to Tagus Cove, an amazing area of high cliffs and boulders and with remarkably clear water. We landed at the base of the cliffs stepping past Marine Iguanas and Galapagos Sealions, as usual, and onto steps carved from the lava, with the aim of climbing to view the water-filled caldera lying just inland – a good bit of exercise after lunch! The waters of the caldera are quite acidic but, even so, there are birds present, and we saw “specks” below us which turned out to be White-cheeked Pintails. We climbed up past the caldera and reached a viewpoint, where we got extensive views across the island. We noted one area, and Darwin explained how the Mangrove Finch programme was being managed, with the aim of re-introducing captive bred birds to the area, that had been cleared of rats and other predators. Our descent was easy, with an unexpected find of a Woodpecker Finch on the way down. Back at the steps, we watched a pair of Flightless Cormorants in courtship display and nest building, before undertaking an exploratory panga ride around the cove.

We stayed at anchor in the cove overnight, giving us all another restful night before a short hop across to Isla Fernandina the following morning.

Day 15

Monday 22nd December

Today we motored across the straights between Isla Isabela and Isla Fernandina, seeing several Galapagos Penguins as we left our overnight anchorage. We dropped anchor off Punta Espinoza and rode our pangas to a rather tricky, dry landing, on some very wet and challenging lava. We negotiated the lava and the Marine Iguanas, and arrived on a beautiful white sandy beach. A very vocal juvenile Galapagos Hawk was sitting atop a mangrove calling constantly, before another came into sight and off they went inland. All around us were myriads of Marine Iguanas and also good number of very pale Lava Lizards. Our walk took us along the beach at the north-eastern tip of the island, the only landing point for the island. We did look for Mangrove Finch, an extremely ambitious search, to no avail, but the island turned up breeding American Oystercatcher, Flightless Cormorants and some very good views of a juvenile Galapagos Hawk feeding on stranded fish. Having watched this bird at close quarters for a few minutes, we were astonished to note an adult bird, perched literally six feet from us in a mangrove.

Nearby shallow pools held feeding Marine Iguanas, Wandering Tattler and a stranded Green Turtle which hopefully escaped on the tide. At least the weather was kind, and the sun not glaring down on the unfortunate creature. There were incredible numbers of iguanas, feeding, swimming and bathing in these pools, and on the surrounding rocks. We walked around the trail noting the remains of a Minke Whale – backbone only, which sits atop some rocks. We watched distant Manta Rays, out in the straights, doing successive leaps out of the water, and soon it was time to re-embark and, after some snorkelling, during which some of managed to watch iguanas feeding underwater, continue our journey back across the straights to Punta Vicente Roca.

The cliffs proved to be very productive yielding incredible numbers of marine iguanas of varying ages and sizes. We watched some aggressive territorial behaviour, and also noted how some of these creatures managed to exit the heavy swell and climb up almost vertical rock to a sunbathing spot. The area was liberally sprinkled with Galapagos Penguins, good numbers (30 or more) Flightless Cormorants and nesting Nazca Boobies. In the dark shade of the cliffs we found nesting Swallow-tailed Gulls and Common Noddies, some on eggs, others with a single chick. The cove has a spectacular vaulted cave where the waves pound onto a boulder “beach” and, taking the pangas inside, we found that there were dozens of Green Turtles, some resting and some in the act of mating. Soon our time was up, and it was back to Cachalote, after a good few hours off the schooner, and we set sail north and west towards Santiago Island.

This was to be one of the last opportunities for spotting cetaceans, and also for another equatorial crossing. We passed through huge flocks of Galapagos Shearwaters, resting on the water which, when disturbed by us, took to the air in their thousands. Also of note were good numbers of Red Necked Phalaropes and, at last, a distant “blow” was spotted. Getting Richard, the ship’s steward who was at the helm, onto the area of the blows, we changed course, and made contact with three and then another four Short-finned Pilot Whales. The next 30 or so minutes was spent with this small pod swimming around us inquisitively, and even under the schooner, giving extremely good close up views as they surfaced a few metres away. Soon it was time to resume our course, and then the first of 13 or so Galapagos Petrels put in an appearance, flying alongside a few hundred metres out, crossing our bows and then back down the opposite side of the schooner. Hundreds of Elliot’s Storm Petrels

also put in an appearance, rising from resting on the sea and wheeling around us, and soon things got even more exciting with seemingly thousands of Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels appearing nearby. It was now getting cool, and we were cruising some miles off the north coast of Isabela when we spotted another, very distant blow. We could not move closer to shore due to the shallow waters, but could see one, possibly two, Bryde's Whales. A little later, a distant but fleeting sighting of a Minke Whale made up our cetacean trio, as we sailed into the gloom of evening and towards our anchorage for the night.

Day 16

Tuesday 23rd December

Our penultimate day in the Galapagos was spent on Santiago Island, the fourth largest island, with a landing at Puerto Egas. Here we saw evidence of recent salt mining and the remains of human settlement, as we walked the shore, seeing familiar species but, once again, getting close up to the wildlife. Several species of Darwin's Finches, Galapagos Mockingbirds and Yellow Warblers were in the Manzanillo and Palo Santo trees, and on the *Opuntia* Cacti. Along the beach, in the many rock pools, we found American Oystercatchers, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Hudsonian Whimbrels. An amazingly adventurous Great Blue Heron had caught a fish we all thought impossible to swallow, and we watched as it bashed its prey against the rocks, before extracting it from the dagger-like bill and swallowing it with considerable expansion of the gullet and oesophagus (mammalian terms but hey!). An incredible feat. We had very close up views of a young Galapagos Hawk observing a relatively new born and very immobile Galapagos Sealion. We thought perhaps that the sealion was dead, as the hawk tentatively strode up and then jumped on to the pup, only to be shocked when the pup moved. The hawk was clearly surprised and quickly moved off.

The tide being low, there were many rock pools to explore, with Orange Cup Corals evident, Galapagos Sealions and Galapagos Fur Seals swimming in the pools, and three Yellow-crowned Night Herons who allowed a very close approach. Back at the beach, it was time for the final snorkelling experience. Earlier we'd watched a Hammerhead Shark cruise along the shoreline, but we did not concern ourselves too much and got into the water, to find that the species most interested in us was the Galapagos Sealions, which became rather inquisitive. Soon it was time to get back to Cachalote, and to move off to Bartolome Island.

We anchored near to Pinnacle Rock, an impressive outcrop which dominates the bay at the eastern end of the island. Our mission this afternoon was to ascend the 300+ steps up to the top of a viewpoint, which allowed fantastic vistas across Bartolome, Isabela, and eastwards towards North and South Seymour Island, and even a reasonable view of the airport buildings. The ascent presented no real challenge, the views were very much worth the effort, and the descent easy, during which we looked in vain for Wendy's fly-away hat which had last been seen descending the northerly slope in the strong wind. It was not found.

Back on board, it was now time to transit to the straight separating North and South Seymour Islands, where we anchored for the night, were treated to a fantastic Lobster dinner, and said our thanks to Darwin and the crew for looking after us and showing us "their" Galapagos. That was not the end. In total darkness, under a star-studded sky we gathered on the upper deck, where we were "treated" to the sight of some very large and menacing Galapagos Sharks which were circling the Cachalote, having been attracted to other fish which had, in their turn, been attracted by our deck lights. It was reassuring to be on board.

Day 17

Wednesday 24th December

We were all awake early (5am) for coffee and an early panga ride to North Seymour Island. Our final landing, before we left the Cachalote, was just as dawn was breaking and, looking back at Cachalote, revealed her in all the glory of a stunning sunrise.

On the island our main objective was to see displaying male Magnificent Frigatebirds, and their outrageous inflated throat sacs. Our first objective, for one final time, was getting past the Galapagos Sealions that almost always seemed to hog the landing stages. That done, we found some of their near relatives, Galapagos Fur Seals, and we were off walking through colonies of Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds. It was the latter that were displaying and, as they only do this in the early morning, we understood our early start. We were not disappointed, and got some extremely close views of displaying males, nest building, and even some very young chicks being fed by their parents.

We only had an hour, and then back to the Cachalote for breakfast, packing, and disembarkation at Baltra port, and a short bus ride to the airport. The airport is modern, and has ample catering and various outlets to keep you occupied, while awaiting your flight. If you want wall to wall Darwin's Finches (Small and Medium Ground) then it's difficult to escape them in the departure hall – they are everywhere. Outside the hall, we saw our final Lava Gulls and even Galapagos Doves, before we were boarding for the flight to Quito, where we set off for the Garden Hotel San Jose in Puenbo, for two nights.

Day 18

Thursday 25th December

After a pleasant night's sleep, and a relatively sedate start, we were off through the quiet of a Christmas Day morning through Quito and up, up and up towards Volcan Antisana and the Paramo. The Paramo is an alpine/tundra-like system of montane vegetation above the tree-line, and composed of grasses, rosette plants and dwarf shrubs. We stopped off first though, to visit the Hacienda Antisanilla, where we were soon able to get reasonable scoped views of a majestic Andean Condor, sitting on a distant cliff face. Before long, we spotted another, and then one was in flight, being harassed by a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. The eagle is large, but totally dwarfed by the condor in flight mode. Spectacular views were had by all, and topped off by feeding Giant Hummingbirds and Sparkling Violetears. Back in the bus, and distant views of a White-tailed Deer (closely related to Mule Deer) and the first of many Carunculated Caracaras. Soon we were stopping every few hundred metres, as more and more birds and interesting flowers revealed themselves. Birdlife included Andean Lapwings, Andean Gulls, hordes of Caracaras, and a spread of Bar-winged Cinclodes, Plumbeous Sierra Finches and three Ecuadorian Hillstars. At the reservoir, we sought out Andean Teal, Andean Coot, Andean Duck and Silvery Grebes. Success with all, and topped up with a pair of Many-striped Canasteros, Stout-billed Cinclodes and a fleeting and frustrating Grass Wren.

We returned to the hacienda for a large lunch, and then we had some time birding in the grounds. Lunch was interrupted by stunning views of feeding hummers, including ultra-close-ups of the Violetears. A stroll downhill, to explore the nearby reservoir from a viewpoint, revealed Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Teal and Andean Gull. A rather flighty Shining Sunbeam eventually gave itself up to photographers, as well as a distant Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and the sounds of calling Tawny Antpittas.

Back at our hotel, we had time for a quick tour of the grounds, which were alive with Violetears, and Philip turned up an Aplomado Falcon, which came in to roost.

After a very pleasant dinner, we said several goodbyes to the four going off early to the Amazon extension, and had a fairly early night.

Day 19

Friday 26th December

The next morning was truly a bright and cheerful comparator to the weather in the UK. The forecast for the latter was of cold and snow, and those flying back via Amsterdam were alerted to the potential of delays there.

With plenty of time (2pm or 6pm to the airport), the grounds of our hotel and nearby lanes offered up good birding potential, even after a late breakfast. Good numbers of Sparkling Violetears and several Green Violetears were evident, accompanied by the ever-resent Rufous-collared Sparrows and Eared Doves. Just outside the hotel, some vegetable gardens turned up Black-and-white Seedeater and Scrub Tanager, with fly-over Black Vultures and many Blue-and-white Swallows. The hotel grounds produced nesting Vermillion Flycatchers – with much less effort compared to that needed to see them on Isabela! These were accompanied by Rusty Flowerpiercer, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, Hooded Siskins, Common Ground Doves, Social Flycatcher, Great Thrushes and a Crimson-mantled Woodpecker.

Then it was time for the off. Our bus arrived early and we left for the airport, a swift check-in and procedures. Take off on time, arrival at Madrid – with a reasonable night's sleep – and a bang-on-time arrival at Heathrow.

Day 20

Saturday 27th December

Overnight flight to Europe, and home.

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Species Lists

Birds on Galapagos (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

Common Name	Scientific Name	December														
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Galapagos Penguin	<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>						1		1	4	6	20+	20+	3		
Waved Albatross	<i>Phoebastria exulans</i>		1	2	26							1				
Galapagos Petrel	<i>Pterodroma phaeopygia</i>		2	2						2				13	2	
Galapagos Shearwater	<i>Puffinus subalaris</i>		1000s	100s	100s	1000+	1000s	100s	10+	1000s	10+	100s	100s	1000s	1000s	10s
Elliot's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites gracilis</i>	1	50+	100+	100+	20+	30+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	50+	100s	100s	3
Wedge-rumped Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma tethys</i>			10+	1		2	1000s			1			1000s		
Galapagos Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>		2			10					3	2		3	2	
Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>		4	2	4		1	10+		1						
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>	50+	100s	100+	100s	100s		100+		50+	20+	50+	50+	20+	100s	100s
Great Frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>			1	1			100s		2		2		2	10+	10s
Blue-footed Booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>	10	5	20+	100s	100s	100s		20+	50+	100s	100s	10s	10+	100s	50+
Nazca Booby	<i>Sula granti</i>		6	10+	50+	10+	5	50+		10+		2	1	10+	50+	20+
Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>							1000+								
Flightless Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum harrisi</i>											30+	30+	40+		
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	100s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s	10s
White-cheeked Pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>	1		4		2	2		20+	2	10+	4	6			
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>					17					12	3				
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	1		2		1	3		2	1	2	1				
Cattle Egret	<i>Bulbulcus ibis</i>	500+	1			10+			100s		2					1
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striatus striatus</i>										1	7	1	2	2	
Lava Heron	<i>Butorides sundevalli</i>	2		1		1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>				2	2		3							3	
Galapagos Hawk	<i>Buteo galapagoensis</i>		1		3						1		2	4	2	
Galapagos Rail	<i>Laterallus galapagoensis</i>										3					
Paint-billed Crake	<i>Neocrex erythrops</i>							H		H						
Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>	6		1					28		4	6				
Hudsonian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>	1				2	1	1	3		3			1	4	
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>										1					
Wandering Tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanum</i>	1	6	2	3		3	1	1	1	5	1	3	4	4	1

Common Name	Scientific Name	December														
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		3	8		3	2	1			20+	1			2	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					5					10+		1		2	
Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>										1					
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>						10+								3	
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>										1					
Red Necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		500+	200+			200+	100s		100s			20+		1000+	
Red (Grey) Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>			10+			3									
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>			3	1		1			2	1			2	3	
Mexican Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>			1			4		2		20+					
Back-bellied (Grey) Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>					1	6									
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>			1				1	2		4			1	1	1
Lava Gull	<i>Larus fuliginosus</i>	6	6	2			1	1	6		4					
Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>							2		1				1	1	4
Swallow-tailed Gull	<i>Larus furcatus</i>		100s		50+		2	100s						10+	1	20+
Common Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	10+	50+			3	10	50+	2	20+	50+	2	20+	100+	100+	100s
Galapagos Dove	<i>Zenaida galapagoensis</i>		4		20+		1	10+	2	2	1			3		5
Dark-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus melacoryphus</i>												1			
Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>	50+		2		3	1		20+		2	5	3			
Galapagos Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio galapagoensis</i>						3									
Galapagos Barn Owl	<i>Tyto punctatissima</i>							2								
Vermillion Flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>										1					
Galapagos Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus magnirostris</i>	3		1	2	6	2		6		2		2			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica erythrogaster</i>													2		
Galapagos Mockingbird	<i>Nesomimus parvulus</i>	25+	4				10+	20+	10+	6	4	2	20+	1	5	
Hood Mockingbird	<i>Nesomimus macdonaldi</i>				40+											
Chatham Mockingbird	<i>Nesomimus melanotis</i>			3												
Galapagos Martin	<i>Progne modesta</i>											1				
Large Ground Finch	<i>Geospiza magnirostris</i>						1	6					2			
Medium Ground Finch	<i>Geospiza fortis</i>	2		1		5	6		10+	1	20+	1	10+		20+	50+
Small Ground Finch	<i>Geospiza fuliginosa</i>	100s	20+	100s	100s	100s	100s		100s	5	10s	10s	100s	100s	100s	100s
Sharp-beaked Ground Finch	<i>Geospiza difficilis</i>							10+								
Common Cactus Finch	<i>Geospiza scandens</i>	5	10+				5		10+	4	5					

Common Name	Scientific Name	December														
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Large Cactus Finch	<i>Geospiza conirostris</i>				2			4								
Vegetarian Finch	<i>Platypiza crassirostris</i>						1		2							
Large Tree Finch	<i>Camarhynchus psittacula</i>								2							
Medium Tree Finch	<i>Camarhynchus pauper</i>					1										
Small Tree Finch	<i>Camarhynchus parvulus</i>					1			10+		10+		10+			
Woodpecker Finch	<i>Cactospiza pallida</i>								1		1		1			
Grey Warbler Finch	<i>Certhidia fuscus</i>				3			2								
Green Warbler Finch	<i>Certhidia olivacea</i>	1							6		2		1			
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	50+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	2	20+	4	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+
Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>					1										

Birds recorded on mainland Ecuador

Common Name	Scientific Name	Quito inc Botanical Gdns	Antisana and Hotel	Quito Hotel area
		December		
		9	25	26
Andean Teal	<i>Anas andium</i>		20+	
Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas spinicauda</i>		6	
Andean Duck	<i>Oxyura ferruginea</i>		3	
Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>		8	
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>			3
Andean Condor	<i>Vultur gryphus</i>		2	
Black-faced (Andean) Ibis	<i>Theristicus melanopis</i>		20+	
Black-chested Buzzard-eagle	<i>Geranoaetus melanoleucus</i>		1	
Carunculated Caracara	<i>Phalacrocorax carunculatus</i>		80+	
Aplomado Falcon	<i>Falco femoralis</i>		1	
Andean Coot	<i>Fulica ardesiaca</i>		10+	
Andean Lapwing	<i>Vanellus resplendens</i>		4	
Andean Gull	<i>Larus serranus</i>		200+	
Eared Dove	<i>Zenaida auriculata</i>	100s		10s
Black-winged Ground-dove	<i>Metriopelia melanoptera</i>		3	
Sparkling Violetear	<i>Colibri coruscans</i>	20+	20+	3
Ecuadorian Hillstar	<i>Oreotrochilus chimborazo</i>		3	
Shining Sunbeam	<i>Aglaeactis cupripennis</i>	2	1	
Black-tailed Trainbearer	<i>Lesbia victorae</i>	4	2	2
Tyrian Metaltail	<i>Metallura tyrianthina</i>			1
Giant Hummingbird	<i>Patagona gigas</i>		2	
Stout-billed Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes excelsior</i>		2	
Bar-winged Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes fuscus</i>		20+	
Many-striped Canastero	<i>Asthenes flammulata</i>		3	
Streak-backed Canastero	<i>Asthenes wyatti</i>		1	
Tawny Antpitta	<i>Grallaria quitensis</i>		H	
Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant	<i>Ochthoeca fumicolor</i>		1	
Paramo Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola alpina</i>		1	
Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant	<i>Agornis montanus</i>		1	
Great Thrush	<i>Turdus fuscater</i>	20+	100+	10+
Brown-bellied Swallow	<i>Notiochelidon murina</i>		2	
Blue-and-White Swallow	<i>Notiochelidon cyanoleuca</i>	3	10+	50+
Grass Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>		1	
Paramo Pipit	<i>Anthus bogotensis</i>		3	
Cinereous Conebill	<i>Conirostrum cinereum</i>	1		
Black Flowerpiercer	<i>Diglossa humeralis</i>	6	1	
Blue-and-Yellow Tanager	<i>Thraupis bonariensis</i>			3
Rufous-collared Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>	100s	10+	20+
Hooded Siskin	<i>Carduelis magellanica</i>			5
Crimson-mantled Woodpecker	<i>Piculus rivolii</i>			1
Tropical Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus melancholius</i>	1		2
Grey Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>	1		1
White-crested Elaenia	<i>Elaenia albiceps</i>	1		
Scrub Tanager	<i>Tangara vitriolana</i>			4
Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	1		
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			3
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1
Blue-grey Tanager	<i>Thraupis episcopus</i>			1

Common Name	Scientific Name	Quito inc Botanical Gdns	Antisana and Hotel	Quito Hotel area
		December		
		9	25	26
Vermillion Flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>			3
Black-and-White Seedeater	<i>Sporophila luctuosa</i>			1
Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>			4
Rusty Flowerpiercer	<i>Giglossa sitoides</i>			1
Green Violetear	<i>Colibri thalassinus</i>			1