Galapagos Islands Tour Report 2023

13 May 2025

by Pete Morris

The Galapagos archipelago is situated 1000 kilometres out into the Pacific Ocean off Ecuador. Our cruise around the key wildlife sites in these fantastic islands offers an amazing chance to experience some fabulously tame wildlife, with a big list of endemic birds as a great bonus! It also offers an outstanding chance for wildlife photography and even, for those so-inclined, some great snorkelling. The Galapagos have one of the highest rates of endemism of any island group in the world and harbour many unique creatures, including several forms of Giant Tortoise, the strange but wonderful Marine Iguana, and no fewer than 30 endemic species of birds! The islands are also justly famous as the birthplace of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution through natural selection, and the inspiration for his book The Origin of Species, formulated after his visit in 1835. He found these islands inhabited by a strange, almost random, selection of plants, reptiles, birds and mammals – all of which had apparently reached the islands by chance and were in the process of 'coming to terms' with their new-found environment, slowly evolving into new species. The Ecuadorian government declared most of the 8000 square kilometres (nearly 3100 square miles) of the archipelago, which consists of over 50 islands, a national park in 1959. Most of the archipelago and its important wildlife is now carefully protected as one of the most precious of the world's natural showpieces. Sadly, a new threat looms, and since our visit, bird flu has reached the islands. We can only hope that this dreadful disease is contained and doesn't do any catastrophic damage.

Our tour is designed to see just about all of the available endemic birds on these islands, on a specially crafted itinerary, in the shortest possible time. We again used the handsome, first-class motor yacht, the Nemo III, which has 8 cabins available and comfortably takes up to 14 passengers. A cosy but superb boat from which to explore the Galapagos! Once again, we managed to see all of the available endemic birds on our route, as well as nearly all of the available endemic subspecies. Strictly following the current taxonomy, we

recorded 67 species on the tour as well as four species of mammals and good number of reptiles and insects. The birds included one major surprise, a Christmas Shearwater, a first for the Galapagos and Ecuador, and the first documented record for the whole South American continent!

There are some islands and landing sites where tourists are not allowed to land, and consequently it is not really possible to see all of Darwin's finches. On our short cruise we visited eight of the main islands, namely Santa Cruz, Genovese, Isabela, Fernandina, Floreana, Santa Fé, San Cristóbal and Espanola. We also visited several smaller offshore satellite islands including Baltra, Seymour Norte and Champion Islands. We had great landing slots to see the birds and were able to spend extended landing times on each of the islands we visited. There were many highlights but surely the walk amongst the breeding Waved Albatrosses on Espanola topped it all, but seeing hordes of Marine Iguanas, skulking Paint-billed and Galapagos Crakes, stunning breeding Blue-footed, Red-footed and Nazca Boobies, immaculate Swallow-tailed Gulls, and strange Flightless Cormorants will live long in our memories. On our cruises at sea, endless seabirds including elegant Galapagos Petrels and endearing Wedge-rumped, Elliot's and Band-rumped Storm Petrels all of which were much appreciated. As for Darwin's finches… the copious head-scratching whilst trying to sort them out will certainly live long in the memory! It really was a fabulous adventure and a magical experience, which seemed to whistle by in double quick time!

Our tour started in Quito where the group met and we were soon on our way to the Galapagos after a very smooth passage through Quito Airport and a punctual flight. We arrived at Baltra Island (where the main international airport is located) off the north end of Santa Cruz, and went through all the necessary bureaucratic procedures, but it was smoothly run and really tourist friendly! Champing at the bit we grabbed our bags, met our local naturalist guide Darwin – yes that really is his name, and ventured out hungry for our first new birds! Within minutes we'd encountered our first endemic birds, with a couple of Galapagos Doves and our first Darwin's finches, the Small Ground Finch and the larger and larger-billed Medium Ground Finch.

All assembled and raring to go, we transferred by bus to the Itabacca Canal noticing Land Iguanas and Blue-footed Boobies as we went, and reaching the channel, our first Galapagos Shearwaters caused some excitement! We then took the zodiac across to the Nemo III to be introduced to our wonderful crew and settle into our cabins. We then set off, and due to a slight mis-communication, headed first for Bachas Beach. This turned out to be a fortuitous accidental detour, as, whilst watching the numerous Elliot's Storm Petrels and feeding Brown Noddies and Galapagos Shearwaters, an all-dark shearwater was spotted with them, and this turned out to be the rarest bird of the trip, a Christmas Shearwater, a bird more regular much further west in the Pacific. We also noted our first smart Nazca Boobies and Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels. A great start!

It was now late afternoon and we quickly navigated to Seymour Norte Island just a few minutes away where we had our first introductory landing and walk. It was a really good to start to our adventure and our short walk took a couple of hours and we stayed until sunset, seeing Lava Herons, stunning Swallow-tailed and Lava Gulls, and many breeding Great Frigatebirds and Blue-footed Boobies, as well as many Land Iguanas. After sunset we were back on the boat and after our introductory cocktails and first of many great dinners, we sailed out from the bay and off to the north towards remote Genovesa Island.

Dawn on the deck! This became a habit for many, sipping coffee and soaking up the new location that we'd arrived at, as most of the long sailings were undertaken at night. Our first morning was inside the sea-filled old caldera of Genovesa (Tower) Island, a fantastic location! We set off in the zodiac early and made our first landing of the day at Prince Philip's Steps, pausing to see Galapagos Fur Seals as we went, a much scarcer creature than the common and widespread Galapagos Sea Lion. We climbed the natural steps, admiring Nazca and Red-footed Boobies as we reached the top, and walked across the island to the huge Wedge-rumped Storm Petrel breeding colony. And what an incredible place it was, with thousands or tens of thousands of these storm petrels flying around in broad daylight. Simply amazing, and they were joined by plenty of superb Red-billed Tropicbirds. Sadly, the only Short-eared Owl that we located was a rather sad-looking, sickly individual. The bauri race of Galapagos Mockingbird was common (a likely future split as Genovesa Mockingbird) and we also had some finches to look for. Although we managed to see Genovesa Ground Finch, Genovesa Cactus Finch, the mentalis race of Grey Warbler Finch and impressive-billed Large Ground Finches, some of the views were a little fleeting and more effort was required. However, we were hungry, and breakfast beckoned.

After breakfast and some snorkelling for those that wished, we relaxed for a while, watching the Lava Gulls that enjoyed the boats, and then took lunch before making a lovely landing at Darwin Beach. Here, the three finches paraded in front of us in a much more friendly fashion, with the sharp-billed Genovesa Ground Finch, the chunky Genovesa Cactus Finch and the colossal-billed Large Ground Finch all seen well at close range, the different sizes and structures of the three species being very apparent! We also admired our first Mangrove

Warblers and Wandering Tattlers as well as numerous Swallow-tailed and Lava Gulls, and numerous boobies, tropicbirds and frigatebirds all offering plenty of photographic opportunities! What a great place!

Late afternoon we left Genovesa behind and spent the last couple of hours of the day watching seabirds as we sailed west past the southern end of Marchena Island. Here we picked up some smart Galapagos Petrels, our first Band-rumped Storm Petrels, and an all-dark storm petrel which, on review of the rather poor images acquired, seems to best fit Markham's (rather than Black) Storm Petrel.

Dawn on the deck found us at Punta Vicente Rocha on the northwest coast of Isabela Island, sat on calm seas surrounded by towering cliffs and a real-life geology lesson! We soon took to the waters in the zodiac and enjoyed some special time with the amazing Flightless Cormorants, swimming, hopping on the rocks, drying their vestigial wings and showing off their lovely blue eyes. These are the largest and only flightless cormorant in the world. We also saw our first Galapagos Penguins in the water, (the only penguin species which may be seen north of the Equator), saw Brown Noddies on the cliffs, and admired the throngs of Marine Iguanas on the cliffs and rocks, that were joined by colourful Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Yellow-crowned Night Herons and a couple more Wandering Tattlers. We returned to Nemo III for breakfast and sailed south to Tagus Cove where we had a quick sail through. The Galapagos Martins sat by the nest boxes turned out to be plastic models, but eventually we did find an individual flying around which gave some great views and was joined by a second individual. This is an extremely rare and localized species, which probably has a world population of fewer than 250 individuals, and we were pleased and relieved to connect with it.

We repositioned, enjoying Galapagos Petrels and Band-rumped Storm Petrels as we went. The snorkellers snorkelled and we took lunch before we made an afternoon landing at a rather hot and barren Punta Espinosa on Fernandina Island. The rocks here held more Flightless Cormorants and some Galapagos Penguins resting up, as well as American Oystercatchers and Great Blue Heron, whilst on shore we enjoyed our first good views of Galapagos Hawks and enjoyed the huge numbers of endearing Marine Iguanas. Late afternoon we set sail south down the Isabela coast, enjoying the scenery and seabirds as we went, before sundowners, another fine meal and another briefing!

The following morning, we awoke off Puerto Villamil, the largest settlement on Isabela, where we took an early breakfast. Before long we were whisked ashore, embarked on our bus, and headed to the highlands at the base of Sierra Negra Volcano on Isabela (Albemarle) Island. We went straight to the top car park and set off on foot, soon finding the lovely Darwin's Flycatcher. Initially a female and a young male, but through the morning we saw several including some stunning adult males. Although superficially similar to the familiar Vermilion Flycatcher, they really are quite distinct. Also here was the productus subspecies of Woodpecker Finch, our first examples of the species, and we found our first Green Warbler Finches and Small Tree Finches as well. With crowds heading up the volcano, and the birds we'd not seen below us, we decided to wander back down. Around the car park we heard our first Galapagos Crakes, and although a little tricky and secretive, we did eventually manage some great views for all! We then headed back down towards Puerto Villamil, checking other wooded areas for Darwin's Finches, though only a couple of the group got lucky with a Large Tree Finch. The rest of us would have to wait! We headed back to the Nemo III for lunch and a break, enjoying more Galapagos Penguins on the transit.

After lunch we visited the tortoise breeding centre just outside town. Here as well as the tortoises, we found the nominate form of Galapagos Mockingbird as well as our first cooperative Galapagos Flycatchers and a couple of Dark-billed Cuckoos. In the nearby wetlands, we saw the galapagoensis race of White-cheeked Pintail, some very pink American Flamingos, Common Gallinules and Black-necked Stilts, and we rounded the afternoon off in the cactus desert, where we had fun separating the Medium Ground Finches from the longer-billed Common Cactus Finches, our first of the tour.

On our way back we had We were back to Nemo by lunch and we soon started cruising west along the south side of Isabela, we had a long way to go until next morning. It was an exciting afternoon though with many seabirds. We logged 59 Galapagos Petrels, three Sooty and one Pink-footed Shearwaters as well as 638 Galapagos Shearwaters. We also had many jumping rays; it was fun photographing them! Ah and the sunset was amazing, especially with Galapagos Petrels flying around us.

It was more or less dark by the time we left Puerto Villamil and we sailed overnight to Floreana Island. Once again, we took an early breakfast and headed ashore at Puerto Velazco Ibarra. Having found our transport, we again headed for the highlands, this time to Asila de la Paz. Here, a walk through the stunted forest brought us several encounters with the critically endangered endemic Medium Tree Finch, as well as more Small Tree Finches, and for some, a sneaky Paint-billed Crake. This failed to reappear for the rest of us, so we headed down to an agricultural area where we all managed to get on to one of these seldom seen crakes. With our targets all seen, we

headed back to Nemo III and set sail once more, this time north to Punta Cormorant at the northern end of Floreana Island. Here we had time to enjoy more shocking pink American Flamingos and had fun watching the Ghost Crabs scuttling about on the beach. We then moved a little way around the coast and anchored off the tiny Champion Island. Whilst some of the group snorkelled, a few of us dusted off the scope and peered over at the island, soon finding our first Floreana Mockingbirds. The views were a little distant, but a late afternoon zodiac cruise to the island secured far more satisfactory views of this critically endangered species. Indeed, it is one of the rarest birds of the archipelago. It was the first mockingbird species described by Charles Darwin and is now only found on two tiny islands off the coast. Apparently, Darwin's reports say these birds were widespread across mainland Floreana, however it only took 50 years for the species to become extinct on the island (some people questions if they were ever numerous on the main island). During his travels he came across three other species of mockingbird in Galapagos, and the differences in the three mockingbird species he saw triggered his idea that they all derived from a common ancestor, and that was used as part of his evidence for evolution by natural selection. So, mockingbirds and not the finches!! Late in the afternoon we set sail towards Santa Fe.

We awoke at Santa Fé (Barrington) Island and had a pre-breakfast landing at Barrington Bay on this special cactus covered island. Our short walk in this unique habitat was very pleasant in the early morning hours! The barringtoni subspecies of Galapagos Mockingbird gave excellent looks as did many Small and (rather large-billed) Medium Ground Finches and more Common Cactus Finches. The Blue-footed Boobies were attractive in the early morning light, and we also loved the Santa Fé Land Iguanas with their unique 'Desert Storm' camouflage. After some snorkelling we set off to San Cristóbal (Chatham) Island. Heading into the wind it was a long and slow crossing, though we did see good numbers of Galapagos Petrels all of the way to the island. Once there, we quickly made our way ashore and headed to the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado, a tortoise breeding centre. On the way, we paused for San Cristobal Mockingbird, the local luteola form of Grey Warbler-Finch and a confusing juvenile Woodpecker Finch of the local form striatipectus. The birding around the centre itself was quiet, so we made a stop on the way back to town in a lovely area where we saw more Woodpecker Finches and the distinctive local parvulus form of Small Tree Finch. Back on Nemo we had a lovely dinner and as soon as we were in bed the anchor was lifted.

Dawn on the deck was at Punta Suarez on the western tip of Espanola Island for what was to be perhaps the climax of the voyage. Espanola is the most south-easterly island of the Galapagos group, a remote island famous for its breeding Waved Albatrosses, where 99% of the World's population is found (a few breeding pairs occur at Isla de La Plata off coast of Manabí, still in Ecuador). A large swell was running, and landing proved somewhat tricky as huge waves crashed over the usual landing spot. Thankfully we all made it and were greeted by the endemic and massive-billed Espanola Cactus Finch, the cinerascens race of Grey Warbling Finch, numerous Galapagos Doves, and of course the endemic Espanola Mockingbird that was literally waiting for us. Apparently, this is the mockingbird species which spends most time on the ground (compared to the other three species and numerous subspecies) and it will be the 'next' species to became flightless (not in our lifetime though). We then embarked upon the walk across the island, and what a place it proved to be! Of course, the breeding Waved Albatrosses, stole the show, and we watched them in courtship display, comically wandering over the short turf, and sailing effortlessly around the headlands and over the sea. It was a breezy morning, with moody light, making the scenery even better, with crashing white frothy waves and energetic blow-holes to entertain us, as Nazca Boobies, Red-billed Tropicbirds and Swallow-tailed Gulls drifted back and forth over the fantastic seascapes! Simply stunning! We also had our best views of Galapagos Hawks (at the nest) and enjoyed the really pinkish coloured, charismatic Marine Iguanas. It was a truly fantastic morning. We then made our way to Bahia Gardner and were briefly accompanied by a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins. This bay with its superb sandy beach is on the northern shore of Espanola and allowed another snorkelling opportunity as well as more close ups with the endemics and an appreciated Espanola Snake. By late afternoon it was time to head back to Nemo III for one last time, and for a final dinner and cocktails. Our time aboard had simply flashed by, and we made our way back to the Itabacca Canal where we disembarked at dawn the following day. It had been a fantastic voyage, and it was with sadness that we bade farewell to our brilliant crew.

We had a full day to explore this second largest island of the archipelago and with Darwin still at our side, we headed south across Santa Cruz Island, with a few targets still in mind. We made several stops as we headed south, successfully securing great looks at both males and females of our two missing finches, the chunky Vegetarian Finch and the uncommon Large Tree Finch. We also found several Woodpecker Finches, the nominate pallidus subspecies here, as well as many Green Warbling Finches and Galapagos Mockingbirds.

We visited some farms where we had excellent encounters with the amazing Galapagos Giant Tortoises, including some huge individuals feeding in the gardens on the many fruiting trees. They were really impressive indeed! We also saw a couple of American Barn Owls, of the distinctive endemic punctatissima race, roosting in a generator shed! A lovely looking bird: it's always great to see a Tyto anywhere in

the World! After a fine lunch, and having checked in to our hotel, most of us made our way up to Media Luna in the highlands of Santa Cruz. Our hike up was easy enough, though it was cool and misty, and eventually we found more Galapagos Crakes, one of which showed very well. It was great to see this slate-bluish bird again, with its piercing red eye and spotted wings, as it scurried about secretively in the ferny undergrowth.

Our final dinner at Puerto Ayora was a great time to remember all the amazing adventures we had shared on this action-packed wildlife bonanza. A few of us explored town that evening too which was good fun, and a great atmosphere. After breakfast the following morning, we boarded the bus and retraced our steps north. We crossed the Canal Itabacca and made our way to the airport, saying our fond farewells to our knowledgeable guide Darwin who had made a big effort to make the tour successful. We will long remember his fantastic drawings that he made on the whiteboard for the daily program too! We then had a smooth flight back to Quito, where the tour ended. Our 2023 Galapagos tour had finished, and we can certainly conclude that the archipelago delivered! We saw all the birds we wanted, whilst generally having a great time and were most certainly looked after very well indeed by the crew!

Yellow-crowned Night Heron (image by Pete Morris)

Wedge-rumped Storm Petrel (image by Pete Morris)

Wandering Tattler (image by Pete Morris)

Small Ground Finch (image by Pete Morris)

San Cristobal Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Sally Lightfoot Crab (image by Pete Morris)

Short-eared Owl (image by Pete Morris)

Vegetarian Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Wedge-rumped Storm Petrel (image by Pete Morris)

Woodpecker Finch (image by Pete Morris)

White-cheeked Pintail (image by Pete Morris)

Santa Cruz Lava Lizard (image by Pete Morris)

Small Tree Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Paint-billed Crake (image by Pete Morris)

Red-billed Tropicbird (image by Pete Morris)

Santa Fe Iguana (image by Pete Morris)

Sunset (image by Pete Morris)

Waved Albatross (image by Pete Morris)

Woodpecker Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Woodpecker Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Waved Albatross (image by Pete Morris)

Swallow-tailed Gull (image by Pete Morris)

Santa Fe Lava Lizard (image by Pete Morris)

Red-footed Booby (image by Pete Morris)

Medium Ground Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Magnificent Frigatebird (image by Pete Morris)

Large Ground Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Green Warbler Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Genevosa Ground Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Ghost Crab (image by Pete Morris)

Large Tree Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Mangrove Warbler (image by Pete Morris)

Medium Tree Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Nazca Booby (image by Pete Morris)

Marine Iguanas (image by Pete Morris)

Large Tree Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Grey Warbler Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Giant Tortoise (image by Pete Morris)

Great Blue Heron (image by Pete Morris)

Lava Gull (image by Pete Morris)

Marine Iguanas (image by Pete Morris)

Nazca Booby (image by Pete Morris)

Nemo III (image by Pete Morris)

Marine Iguana (image by Pete Morris)

Lava Heron (image by Pete Morris)

Land Iguana (image by Pete Morris)

Great Frigatebird (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Penguin (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Lava Lizard (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Crake (image by Pete Morris)

Espanola Snake (image by Pete Morris)

Darwin's Flycatcher (image by Pete Morris)

Darwin's Flycatcher (image by Pete Morris)

Fernandina Lava Lizard (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Dove (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Martin (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Petrel (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Sea Lion (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Flycatcher (image by Pete Morris)

Flightless Cormorant (image by Pete Morris)

Elliots Storm Petrel (image by Pete Morris)

Espanola Lava Lizard (image by Pete Morris)

Floreana Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Fur Seal (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Shearwater (image by Pete Morris)

Genevosa Cactus Finch (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Hawk (image by Pete Morris)

Galapagos Crake (image by Pete Morris)

Espanola Mockingbird (image by Pete Morris)

Dark-billed Cuckoo (image by Pete Morris)

Christmas Shearwater (image by Pete Morris)

Bottle-nosed Dolphin (image by Pete Morris)

Band-rumped Storm Petrel (image by Pete Morris)

American Oystercatcher (image by Pete Morris)

American Barn Owl (image by Pete Morris)

American Flamingo (image by Pete Morris)

Brown Pelican (image by Pete Morris)