

Tour Report

Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine

19 May – 1 June 2022

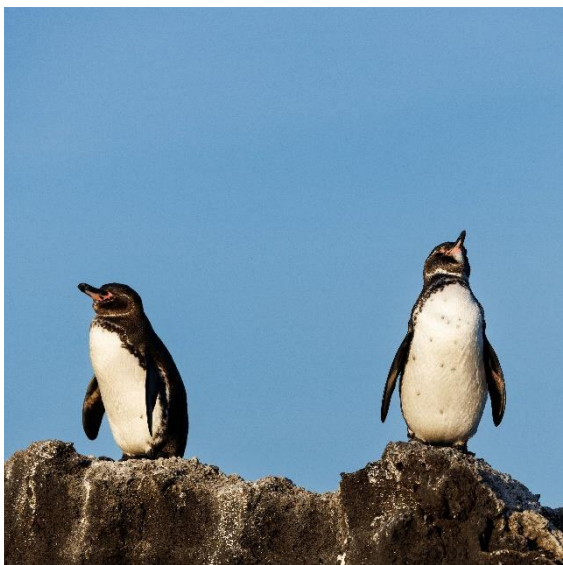
Marine iguana



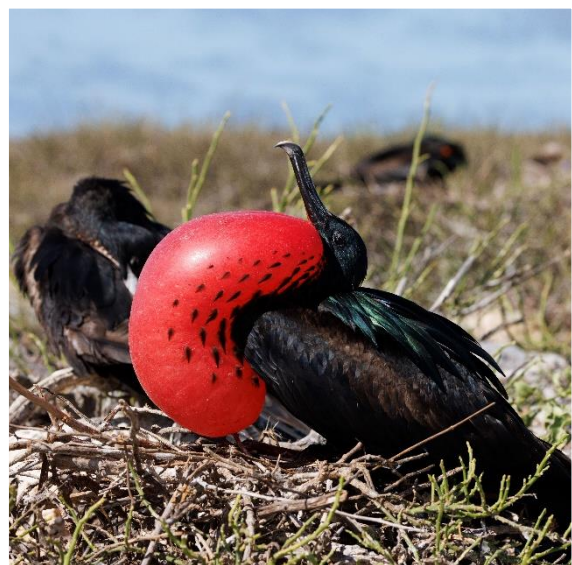
Blue-footed booby



Galapagos penguin



Great frigatebird



Compiled by Chris Breen

Day 1: London Heathrow to Quito (via Amsterdam)

Thursday 19 May 2022

Weather: mostly clear skies with the odd snow shower, light wind and -7° C

Mark and Chris were at Quito airport to meet the group as they arrived from the UK. Being the end of the rainy season in Ecuador the weather was humid and a little rainy.

It was an hour-long drive from the airport into the Latin Quarter of Quito where we were staying at Casona de la Ronda. After everyone had settled into their rooms, we went to an excellent restaurant a short walk down the road for dinner and a drink before returning to the hotel for an early night – it had been a long day and it was going to be an early start in the morning.

Day 2: San Cristobal

Friday 20 May 2022

Weather – hot and muggy!

We gathered in the hotel foyer, picked up our packed breakfast and were on the coach to the airport by 6:00. Our flight departed at 9:30 and we landed in the Galapagos at about midday. We put our baggage in the back of a pick-up truck, jumped onto the coach and went straight to the harbour. As we walked along the jetty, we were treated to the sight of a large Galapagos sea lion lying on a bench at the end of the pier scratching its back. There were plenty more sea lions on the jetty (as well as a lava heron) as we jumped on the Zodiacs (pangas) over to Beluga, and magnificent frigatebirds overhead.

We settled into our cabins and had our first onboard lunch before getting ourselves ready to return to shore and walk through town. Once onshore we boarded the bus which took us up to El Junco – a collapsed volcano (caldera) which is home to one of the few ‘sweet water’ lagoons in the archipelago.



This is the place where the frigatebirds come to wash the salt water from their wings, and it is also home to white-cheeked pintail, Galapagos yellow warbler and small ground finch - we all had superb views of each of them. If the skies had been clear, we would have been able to see the whole of the crater – but there was no such luck for us today.

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We then moved on to the tortoise centre, 20 minutes' drive away and straight away saw, small ground finch, warbler finch, yellow warbler, Galapagos flycatcher, and of course tortoises before returning to the bus and the town for a quick look round, a quick beer and then heading back to the boat.



After a shower and before dinner Chris did a short presentation on what to expect on the voyage and life onboard Beluga. Dinner followed – everyone was exhausted – and afterwards, Juan ran through a bird list, gave us a briefing in respect of tomorrow, and everyone retired for an early night.

Day 3: Espanola

Saturday 21 May 2022

Weather – overcast at first, but clear sunny skies followed.

It was a little overcast when we woke up this morning in Gardner Bay but being the first full day in the Galapagos enthusiasm for a good wildlife landing was high! After breakfast at 7:00 we got ready, donned our life jackets, and headed over to the beach – most of us barefoot - for our first wet landing where we were treated to a green turtle on the way over. On a pristine white beach on the fringe of an azure-blue sea, we weren't the only ones there, but we were greeted by sea lions which were relaxing on the sand. We were split up and wandered along the beach to photograph the sea lions, marine iguanas, Sally Lightfoot crabs and San Cristobal lava lizards, whilst overhead we had magnificent frigatebirds, brown pelicans, and blue-footed boobies, and on the shoreline Galapagos oystercatcher. One or two of the group also managed a swim.

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After a couple of hours, we took to the Zodiacs and headed back to Beluga for a coffee and some fresh fruit before donning our wetsuits and heading to the other side of the bay for our first snorkelling trip of the voyage. It's one thing seeing and photographing sea lions on land, quite another being in the water with them and watching them play around us as we snorkelled along the rocky cliff face. For some of the group, this was their first experience of snorkelling and everyone who went in had fabulous views of a whole range of fish, with some of the group seeing white-tipped reef sharks.

After an hour or so in the water, we returned to Beluga for a well-earned lunch of soup, fish and a homemade dessert. Mark presented a GoPro workshop after lunch attended by many of the group which finished just in time (!) to get out for the afternoon's visit to Punta Suarez – perhaps one of the most wonderful sites in the whole of the Galapagos.

Supposedly a dry landing, the steps were quite wet and the sea quite variable, but we managed to land safely and were greeted by Espanola mockingbirds keen to investigate our bags, bottles, shoes and cameras. At the end of the jetty, and on the small beach, there were marine iguanas, plenty of sea lions and a young male sea lion that was lying in the middle of the path that wasn't keen for us to pass. Juan temporarily shoed him out of the way so that we could pass safely, and we moved to the other small section of beach – more sea lions (of course) and Galapagos oystercatcher. As we made our way along the path there were more marine iguanas, an Espanola lava lizard sunning itself under a bush, and a pair of Galapagos doves. Overhead were magnificent frigatebirds, swallow-tailed gulls, red-billed tropicbirds and Nazca boobies. On then to the waved albatross nesting area and their 'runway', passing a perched Galapagos hawk as we went. The whole of this incredible area is a feast for the senses, and it is difficult to know where to point your binoculars or camera. The light at this time of day was truly magnificent and made for some incredible photo opportunities. We made it as far as the blowhole before we were defeated by time and had to head back to the jetty.

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On our return walk we realised that the Galapagos hawk had been joined by another and from a distance we were able to see them mating though no one was close enough for a photo. Another ten minutes or so later and we were back at the jetty. Some of us had binoculars trained on the waves and were watching brown noddies and gulls 'surfing' the waves.

Back on board we met at 19:00 in the bar for caipirinhas and an introduction to the captain (Jose) and his crew. After a delicious dinner Juan went through the checklist with us and talked us through our excursions for tomorrow. At this point the boat was beginning to get a bit 'rolly' so most people felt it was a good time to go to bed!

Day 4: Floreana

Sunday 22 May 2022

Weather – sunny at first, then overcast with a few occasional spots of rain.



We had an earlier start this morning with breakfast at 7:30 and were in the Zodiacs and on shore at Punta Cormorant by 8:30. Once landed Juan explained the formation of this particular island that came from an explosive volcano that was very quickly cooled by the sea water. The sand at our landing site was a

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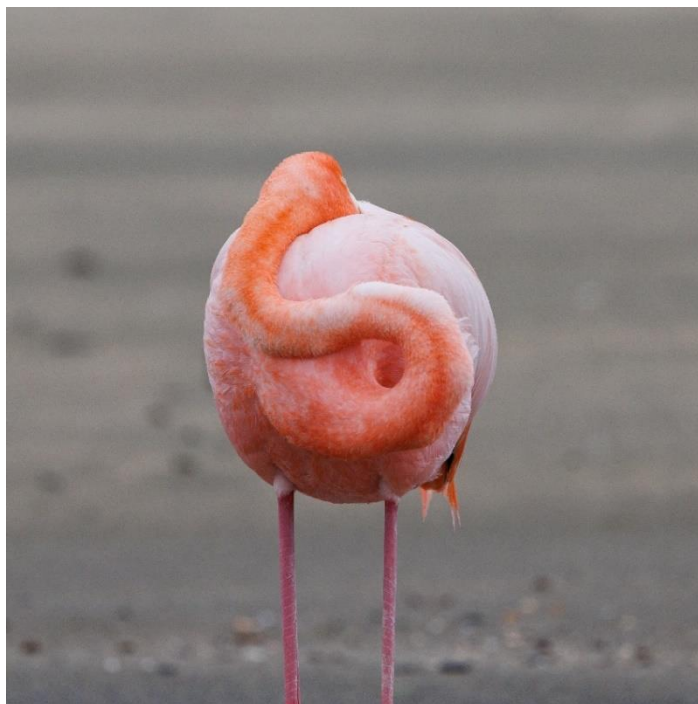
derivative of the volcano and a chestnut brown colour as a result. We began along the path to the lagoon and Juan pointed out what he thought was almost certainly a medium tree finch, becoming incredibly animated as in 35 years he'd never seen one on this island. We managed to get some excellent photos for him to show to the scientists at the Charles Darwin Foundation.

As we continued along the track, we could see the large lagoon to our right and a medium sized flock of Galapagos flamingos – 26 in all – of which two were very white immature flamingos. There was also a white-cheeked pintail on the lagoon and in the nearby trees a pair of yellow warblers. Further on still and we were photographing tiny blue butterflies and Floreana lava lizards which are quite different in appearance to the lava lizards that we were looking at yesterday. Over the hill we came down to a beautiful white sandy beach and walked along the shoreline looking at stingrays and Galapagos sharks that were coming into the very shallow water. Overhead were magnificent frigatebirds, blue-footed boobies, and the occasional cattle egret. There were very clear signs of green turtles having come ashore to nest recently too.

We walked back across the island to our landing site and then along the beach. Imagine our delight when as we were trying to photograph a Galapagos flycatcher it was flying down and landing on the end of one of the group's lens. Galapagos wildlife at its best!

We returned to Beluga for a quick coffee and then got ourselves ready to go snorkelling at Devil's Crown. The currents are quite strong here, so we were 'drift snorkelling' – getting into the water and being carried along by the current but all the time looking at some amazing sea life, including white-tipped reef sharks, Galapagos sharks and a marbled ray. Galapagos shearwaters were in large numbers around the cliffs too.

Lunch was early today – at around 12ish – and once again it was a delicious mix of traditional Ecuadorian fare and international cuisine. We had a little time to relax after lunch and then at 14:30 we were in the Zodiacs for a cruise around Post Office Bay. The weather was overcast and the sky quite dark which made for some excellent photographs of the nearby wildlife which included a couple of huge beach master sealions protecting their beaches and their small harems, ruddy turnstone, mating Sally Lightfoot crabs, golden plover, great blue heron, and four flamingos on the beach which we able to get incredibly close to. We also spent some time trying to photograph diving blue-footed boobies (with some successes!).



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After an hour and a half or so we landed on the beach and went to the post barrel – Ecuador’s first ever post office. After posting cards in the barrel and putting our own cards in the barrel we moved up the path, found somewhere to sit and Juan told the story of the toothless, naked, philosopher and the serial killer!

Back to the beach for short while, and then we returned to the Beluga to freshen up for drinks and dinner. After dinner Mark showed some of the photographs he had taken in the course of the past couple days.

Day 5: Santa Cruz – Dragon Hill & Santiago – Sullivan Bay

Monday 23 May 2022

Weather – overcast, warm

Breakfast was at 7:00 this morning and we were all ready to head out by 8:00 – our first activity being footfall on Santa Cruz, an island famous for the Charles Darwin Research Center. Today however, we landed on the north-western side of the island at Dragon Hill (Cerro Dragon) where there is a population of land iguanas. It was a dry landing (with a wet jump across a narrow sandy isthmus!).



First, we looked at some huge opuntia cacti with long spines on the bough evolved to discourage the tortoises and iguanas from eating them. We looked at cactus finch with its long, pointed bill, resident monarch butterflies and a Galapagos stilt with two young. We think that it lost one of its young to a magnificent frigatebird as we could see a long-legged fledgling in the bill of a frigatebird overhead. The highlight of the morning though was two large male land iguanas making aggressive passes towards one another to dominate or defend their territory. It looked as though it was going to be a long territorial battle – and after 45 minutes or so we left them to it. Juan told us that it was likely to go on all day. Plenty of wonderful photo opportunities though! Further along the trail was a fully grown female, as well as sulphur-coloured butterflies collecting nectar, and timber bees filling up their pollen sacs. Back at the jetty we found a Sally Lightfoot crab eating a monarch butterfly.

We returned to Beluga just before 11:00 and several of us decided to swim in the clear azure-coloured water around the boat jumping off the side of the boat. It was a tremendous way to end the morning – the water was clear and fresh. Lunch followed at midday and then we headed north for Santiago Island and a snorkelling trip in Sullivan Bay.

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We got into our snorkelling gear and headed towards the shore before dropping into the water. At one point there were blue-footed boobies diving around us – that was a challenge for those with GoPro cameras to catch on video! – and we also spotted a Galapagos penguin. It seemed quite happy to be followed, and several of us were able to get some excellent video of it ‘flying’ beautifully underwater. Then there was a huge school of blue fish with bright yellow tails (yellow-tailed surgeon fish) which were very relaxed allowing us to swim along next to them. Just before we got back into the Zodiacs someone spotted a green turtle too which was a great end to an excellent snorkel.

After returning to the Beluga and hanging out our wetsuits to dry on the bow we gathered camera gear and went ashore at Sullivan Bay to look at the pahoehoe lava flow that was formed about 120 years ago. It must be seen to be believed as it looks as though it has only just appeared. We learned about the carpet weed, one of the first plants to colonise the area, and the single small cactus that is amongst the 7 square kilometres of lava flow. Juan took us to a spot where we lay down for a ‘back massage’ and had a group photo.



Unfortunately, as the light was beginning to fade, we needed to get back to the boat for a well-earned drink and dinner. Next stop Genovesa!

Day 6: Genovesa – Darwin Bay and Prince Phillip Steps

Tuesday 24 May 2022

Weather – sunny, warm and with fairly high winds

After six hours or so of sailing overnight we awoke in Darwin Bay on the south-western side of Genovesa. We had breakfast at 7:00 and were in the Zodiacs by 8:00 for a beach landing and were immediately greeted by a small group of Galapagos sealions. A quick look around and we could see swallow-tailed gulls, red-footed boobies, the occasional lava gull, plenty of Galapagos doves, and most significantly great frigatebirds. Many of the males had their bright red pouches puffed up fully and were pointing their bills skyward in the hope of being the ‘most attractive’ to the females.

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We walked (very) slowly along the track photographing and observing what we could – there was so much to see it was difficult to know where to point the camera! The red-footed boobies have rather untidy nests off the ground in the branches of the mangroves and appeared to be completely oblivious to our presence. While mostly brown in colour, the most beautiful of the red-footed boobies are those that are in a white morph – which accounts for about 5% of the population here. The tide was in, so we took off our shoes and waded through a shallow sea, with a small sea cliff on our left and booby-filled mangrove on our right. Once through the short stretch of water we came out onto a lava flow and walked for another 10 metres or so until we came to a beautiful viewpoint over the bay. We were onshore for an extended period and returned to Beluga at about 11:00. There was just about time to download images in time for lunch at 12:00. Was this the very best landing so far?



As a post-lunch lecture Mark told us about the early days of Charles Darwin and shortly after that we got ourselves ready for this afternoon's landing – at El Barranco or Prince Phillips Steps. It was a 30-minute Zodiac ride

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from Beluga and along the way we saw hundreds of Galapagos shearwaters, frigatebirds in flight, half a dozen red-billed tropic birds and ... Galapagos fur seals – the first of the trip. There were six in all, three relaxing on the rocks and three playing in the water.

El Barranco is another of the Galapagos' most incredible landing sites. Not the easiest place to land – especially when the sea is a bit rough – but once on land, and after climbing the steps that take you to the plateau at the top of the cliffs it is well worth while! Nesting frigatebirds, nesting boobies – all three species – and thousands and thousands of Galapagos storm petrels flying round at high speed. In fact, this is the best place in the Galapagos to see them and there are thought to be in the region of 200,000 pairs here. The other bird of great note that lives here is Galapagos short-eared owl, but despite our best efforts, and despite seeing plenty of evidence that they were around (including storm petrel wings, feathers and bones) unfortunately we didn't see one.

We retraced our steps as the sun was going down and set off down the steep steps again where the zodiacs were waiting for us and returned to Beluga for a beer and dinner.

Day 7: Santa Cruz – Black Turtle Cove, the Highlands and the Charles Darwin Research Centre

Wednesday 25 May 2022

Weather – sunny, warm at sea level, cooler and overcast in the highlands.

Today we had a very different start (in fact a very different day altogether) – up at 5:30 for a quick coffee and into the Zodiacs at 6:00 for a cruise around the mangroves of Black Turtle Cove. The water was completely still and calm and we could hear the birds. First, we saw the head of a green turtle emerge from the water and then as we passed through a narrow channel, we saw three or four more turtles swimming next to, and under, the Zodiacs. Just through the channel and we picked up a white-tipped reef shark and then a few more – five in total. Next were rays – seven golden cow rays swimming effortlessly in a 'squadron'. Looking over to the other side of the cove we could see the water surface being broken by more rays, but this time not just seven – it looked as though there were many more. As we paddled over, one of our boats briefly saw a single marbled ray.



With the engine cut, so as not to disturb them, we paddled over and saw that there were maybe 40 or 50 of them. Behind us was another smaller group of rays – maybe ten. There were also brown noddies, brown pelicans,

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yellow warbler, lava heron and great blue heron and of course Sally Lightfoot crabs on the lava as we left the cove.

We were back on-board Beluga for breakfast at around 7:00 and then, breakfast over, we got ourselves ready to head up into the highlands ... which meant putting our life jackets on again and transferring to shore by Zodiac where we were met by a coach that drove us first to a huge and spectacular sink hole (or pit crater) which is home to mosses, ferns, bushes and many trees.

From the sink hole we then drove to a private farm which is inhabited by a significant number of giant tortoises. They are completely free to come and go as they please, but the habitat is clearly perfect for them, and they are there in significant numbers, and as with all the other wildlife on the Galapagos, they are completely unconcerned by our presence.

We headed on to Enchanted Galapagos Lodge for a delicious lunch in very relaxing surroundings and we had an opportunity to chill out for a while before re-boarding the coach and driving to Puerto Ayora and the Charles Darwin Research Center (CDRC). Some of us saw whimbrel on a rocky islet just out to sea, and before we went into CDRC we photographed lava lizards and marine iguanas on the road. We walked along an avenue of button mangroves to CDRC and Juan talked to us about their conservation efforts in respect of the island's giant tortoises particularly. There are several different 'pens' that are home to young tortoises from each of the different islands with a view to ensuring that they don't become extinct. Once they reach a certain age and can fend for themselves, they are then released into the wild on their original island. Of particular interest perhaps were the 'giraffe' tortoises that have evolved with much longer legs and a saddle-shaped carapace to enable them to reach up high and feed.

We were also able to see Lonesome George – now stuffed! – and hear the story of his last couple of decades. From CDRC we walked into town where we had some free time to explore, before returning to the northern part of the island to catch a Zodiac transfer to Beluga for dinner. It was a tremendous day today, and unlike any of the others so far!

Day 8: Sombrero Chino & Rabida.

Thursday 26 May 2022

Weather – sunny, warm with a light breeze and occasionally overcast.

This morning was superb (but then they all have been so far!). Breakfast at 7:00 and in the Zodiacs by 8:00 for a wet landing at Sombrero Chino (Chinese Hat), a small island off the south-east coast of Santiago, so named because of its shape. We were in the Zodiacs close to shore on the Santiago side of the small channel that separates the islands, and someone spotted a Galapagos penguin on a rock. We went over and watched it preening – apparently unconcerned about our presence.

As we crossed the small channel over to Sombrero Chino, Israel (the Zodiac driver) saw a manta ray. We moved a little closer and for a short period it swam next to our boat and then dived deeper and disappeared.



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Sombrero Chino is a small volcanic island with one small white sandy beach made of corals. A short distance inland it quickly turns to black volcanic rocks many of which are covered by a beautiful red, orange and green vegetation. It is known as a place of young sea lions and in the past was also a location that flamingos were found.

We were greeted at the beach by a young sea lion and on a nearby rock a brown pelican was on patrol. As we were getting cameras ready and putting on our shoes, we were watching a penguin swimming at high speed in the shallows. We were on land for nearly two hours, photographing groups of young marine iguanas basking in the sun, and marine iguanas that were returning to land from the sea (where they feed on seaweed). We also had some beautiful (and plentiful!) Sally Lightfoot crabs looking resplendent on the black rocks.



At one point someone called “flamingos in flight” and we watched a pair flying low over the water – the aqua blue and (almost) iridescent pink making for spectacular viewing (if a little far away for photography). We returned to the beach and saw a pair of Galapagos oystercatchers.

Back on-board Beluga we had a coffee and a snack before getting kitted out in wetsuits and returning to the channel for the first snorkelling trip of the day. Those of us that snorkelled were of the view that it was possibly the best snorkelling outing of the trip so far. The water was crystal clear, and it was teeming with fish. Yellow-tailed surgeons, bicoloured and blue-chinned parrotfish, king angelfish, and white-tipped reef sharks. And while the snorkellers were snorkelling others on the Zodiacs were watching a Galapagos hawk hunting.

After an hour of snorkelling, it was time to get back into the Zodiacs and return to Beluga for lunch after which we motored for just over an hour to reach Rabida, the site of our next snorkelling excursion and our next landing.

All in wetsuits, or if not, in life jackets and on-board the Zodiacs, we headed towards the volcanic red beach of Rabida. As we approached, we could see sharks in the shallows obviously feeding. Juan signalled that we could start snorkelling and almost immediately everyone rolled backwards into the water and went in the direction of the sharks. At first the water appeared murky, and it was difficult to get orientated until we realised that the water wasn't murky at all, but that we had dived into a gigantic shoal of sardines and other small fish – which is what the sharks were feeding on. It must have been a shoal of millions and millions of them as it stretched for a considerable distance. We spent much of our time in the shallows

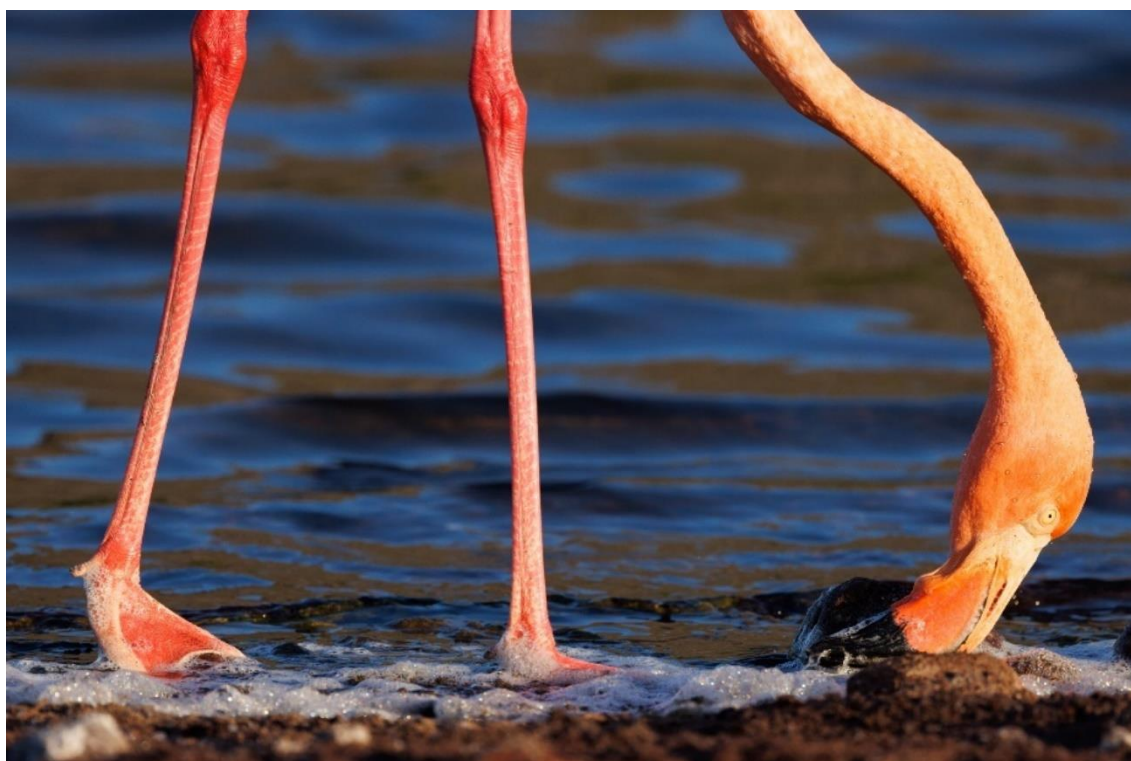
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looking for, and trying to film the sharks, and every now and again we were successful – and some more successful than others. There were at least two sharks – most probably black-tipped reef sharks, and possibly a scalloped hammerhead (though the latter is unconfirmed).

We also saw and filmed Galapagos octopus, bi-coloured parrotfish (female), and above the water brown noddys, marine iguanas and brown pelicans. It was possibly the best snorkel so far ... and then we returned to Beluga to get changed, have a coffee and head out for a landing on Rabida.

As ever, we were welcomed by a sea lion – the light was magnificent and the contrast between the sandy colour of the sea lions and the rich, rusty red sand was magnificent. We walked inland a little, to a brackish lagoon and almost immediately saw a group of Galapagos flamingos, and the light was getting better and better, richer and richer. Staying with the flamingos for some time everyone had an opportunity to get some wonderful photos (and see the white-cheeked pintails that were nearby too).



We walked the entire loop trail on Rabida as the sun was gradually setting, hoping to get a glimpse of a snake. Most of us failed, but there were a lucky two or three who succeeded – though regrettably there was no photographic evidence! Back on-board Beluga there was time for a shower for some, and a beer or two on the sundeck for others, before Mark gave the second part of his excellent presentation about Charles Darwin. Over by 19:30, we then sat down for another delicious dinner, and afterwards went through the species list and had a briefing from Juan about tomorrow.

At around 21:00, Jose pulled up the anchor and we set sail for Puerto Villamil where we arrived in the morning.

Day 9: Isabela, Puerto Villamil.

Friday 27 May 2022

Weather – sunny, warm.

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We woke up in Puerto Villamil – the harbour was full of boats; the sea was shallow and a spectacular turquoise colour. We jumped in the Zodiacs shortly after breakfast and headed over to the town jetty where, after a short wait under a shady tree (next to a sea lion lying on a park bench!), we boarded an open bus and headed inland to Volcan Sierra Negra.



Puerto Villamil is a small town – the only town on Isabela – that is home to around 3,000 people. There is a school, a few restaurants and bars, and little else. The roads in town are sandy and not tarmacked – it is clearly a fairly sleepy place. The drive to Sierra Negra took about 40 minutes through land that is obviously quite intensively farmed. We were dropped off at ‘El Cura’ (The Priest) and began walking to the crater. The 3.5 kilometre walk was a gentle gradient and we kept our eyes open for the beautiful vermilion flycatcher. We had occasional views as we walked.



As we approached the edge of the crater, the mist we had been walking through cleared revealing magnificent views over 10-kilometre-wide crater floor (second only in size to the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania). The last eruption here was only in 2017, so the volcanic lava on the crater floor is extremely fresh! After spending some time enjoying the view, we retraced our steps to the meeting point. En route we managed to see green warbler finch, woodpecker finch and both male and female vermilion flycatcher.

After a short wait for our bus, we head back down the mountain to Puerto Villamil where the Zodiacs were waiting to take us out to Beluga for lunch. The port was busy with boats coming in and out fetching and carrying tourists and bore resemblance to the Maldives! After lunch we came back to Puerto Villamil, this

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time to go to the tortoise breeding and research centre. Not a zoo by any stretch of the imagination, instead this is where the tortoises were placed after having been removed from the slopes of Sierra Negra following an accidental fire in the 1980s that was started by a camper, and which raged for some months before it was finally extinguished. We saw tortoises that were 2 or 3 years old, 30 or 40 years old and even some that were 100+ years old.

As we walked into the centre along the mangrove boardwalk we had yellow warblers, pintails, black stilts, paper wasps (which are exotic and which Juan was delighted to 'extinguish'), and of course the ever-present marine iguanas. Our open-sided blue bus came to collect us from the breeding centre and took us back into town and down to the beach where a few of us were able to enjoy a swim in the turquoise waters and amongst the waves. This was followed by liquid refreshment in the form of a 'Coco Loco' ... a cooled coconut with its top cut off and filled to the brim with white rum. Delicious!

We caught up with Juan, collected our cleaned and ironed laundry and returned to the Beluga for dinner as the sun was setting. Juan ran through the bird and mammal list after dinner and we all retired early in anticipation of another excellent day tomorrow – first stop, Elizabeth Bay.

Day 10: Isabela - Elizabeth Bay, Punta Moreno.

Saturday 28 May 2022

Weather – sunny, partly cloudy, warm.

Eight hours of sailing overnight and we awoke in Elizabeth Bay on the western side of Isabela. After breakfast we jumped into the Zodiacs to explore the nearby mangroves. On the way we stopped at some rocky outcrops to photograph blue-footed boobies and a pair of brown pelicans – one youngster and one in breeding plumage. Before we got to the mangroves, we unhooked the four kayaks from the back of the Zodiac and four of the group got in and were cast off ...

They followed the two Zodiacs on into the mangroves, and once we were in the mangroves Israel and Miguel cut the engines and we just paddled – listening to the sounds of the birds and the rustling of the leaves in the wind.

A young lava heron sitting on a mangrove root just above the water allowed us to get within a few inches which made for some wonderful photographs. There were also plenty of turtles (all ages and sizes!), a golden sea bass, red snapper, some brown pelicans, yellow warblers and even a couple of eagle rays at the end of our cruise. However, the most unusual sighting of them all was of a sealion resting on a fairly narrow root, fairly deep into the twists and turns of the mangroves. It became a 'new species' – a tree lion!

After an hour or so of kayaking we swapped and as we emerged from the mangroves there was a penguin on one of the rocks which we stopped to photograph.

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The kayakers then kayaked all the way back to Beluga which was quite strenuous as the sea was getting choppy as we got closer to the boat, and we had a sideways wind that was pushing us away from where we wanted to go. Everyone made it safely back, however. Back onboard, there was time for a quick coffee before the captain hauled the anchor and we began to head west to Punta Moreno.



The water was quite choppy when we got in at Punta Moreno and by comparison with the snorkelling we've had so far, it was quite cool – even in wetsuits. But ... it surely ranks as the very best snorkelling any of us have done – and I am not sure we knew quite what to expect. Immediately we got in we saw a turtle, and then a second one. Both feeding on the seaweed right at the edge of the ocean and the shore, on volcanic rock. A quick scan revealed more turtles and none of them seemed even slightly concerned by us being there. Over the area that we were snorkelling there must have been 20 or 30 individuals, possibly

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more. We also saw Galapagos big-eye sharks (smallish sharks that were perhaps 45-50 centimetres long). And as we came towards the end of our snorkelling time a female sealion swam up to us to play. She was doing some incredible acrobatics, and quite literally dancing in front of us – it was utterly magical. A snorkelling trip that none of us will ever forget!



We returned to Beluga to change and have a hot chocolate before getting back into the Zodiacs and heading to a series of rocks a little further on from where we snorkelled. The sea was quite choppy until we got there, but once we were in and around the little islets it was much calmer. The light was incredible, and we approached a reasonable sized colony of Galapagos penguins (perhaps 20 or so) on the rocks. On another 'face' of the rock were scores of marine iguanas basking in the late afternoon sunshine, clambering over one another, sleeping on one another, ejecting salt through their nostrils and constantly adjusting their positions. We were a 'safe' distance from them so as not to disturb them but be able to take wonderful photos in the golden hour of light. Sadly, it was then back to Beluga – but not before we saw a few flightless cormorants!

After dinner, and our briefing of tomorrow's activities, several of us went up to the sundeck to look at the night sky. It was a crystal-clear night, and the Milky Way was showing prominently in the sky, along with the Southern Cross, Scorpio, Arcturus, the Great Bear and millions of other stars. Stargazing was a great way to end another excellent day.

Day 11: Isabela - Urbina Bay & Tagus Cove

Sunday 29 May 2022

Weather – sunny, slightly cloudy, warm, muggy.

The beach at Urbina Bay is very steep and landing could have been a challenge if the sea was choppy, but we were lucky today and the water was almost flat calm. By the time we got to the beach at just after 8:00, a group from one of the other boats was heading back for breakfast, but another vessel was also landing passengers at the same time as us. Juan had known about the other group, and not wanting us to clash, he led us on foot around the bay looking at Sally Lightfoot crabs and marine iguanas, and for some, photographing blue-footed boobies diving into the sea at high speed. The challenge for the photographers

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was to capture the crabs in mid-air as they jumped from one rock to another. Whilst trying to capture the large marine iguanas looking out to sea with the white water of a breaking wave behind their heads wasn't easy, and some did better than others!

By the time we had finished our session on the rocks and returned to the beach the other party was disappearing and we had the trail to ourselves. We couldn't walk to the very top of the beach as it was a turtle nesting area, but we walked behind the beach and almost immediately saw the giant tortoise endemic to this part of Isabela – in fact three or four of them, all females. They specialise in eating the small 'apples' from the many trees on this part of the island – as was evident from their droppings! Further on and we were looking at a colourful land iguana – which although the same species as the one on Santa Cruz, is significantly larger, and is known to be the largest of the land iguanas in the Galapagos archipelago.



Small and medium ground finches, yellow warblers, and the Galapagos mockingbird sang beautifully as they accompanied us on our short walk around this part of the island. We finally got back to the black sandy beach at around 11:15, in time for a quick swim with the occasional turtle head breaking the surface of the water, and even a ray (though we weren't sure which species of ray) jumping out of the water right near the beach. Then it was time to pile into our Zodiacs and return to 'the mothership' for another delicious lunch. Whilst we were motoring the two hours or so to Tagus Cove, Mark did a short masterclass on how to get the best out of a GoPro with the smartphone app.

The snorkelling in the Galapagos is without doubt world class, in fact it may well be the very best snorkelling on earth. After lunch we donned our wetsuits and headed for the Zodiacs and went out past the entrance to the cove. Several of us were snorkelling, one of the group decided to kayak (the conditions for kayaking were exceptional), and some of the group opted to do a Zodiac cruise. The visibility wasn't great to begin with, but that was largely due to the cooler water and the increased nutrients in the water ... which of course makes it good for many of the sea-dwelling creatures. Almost as soon as the snorkellers got in the water there was a call of "turtle" and we swam over to where the turtle was, then we saw a second, and as with yesterday, realised that there were turtles feeding almost everywhere we looked. In addition, there were puffer fish, flightless cormorants, marine iguanas (on the rocks at the water's edge), pelicans, and sea lions basking in the sun. Every now and then a sea lion would drop into the water, and with incredible acrobatic skill, swim round and round us, twisting and turning, investigating us. Around the cove

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there were brown pelicans sitting on the rocks, and a small group of penguins that were very happy for us to get close to them – completely unperturbed.

After getting back to Beluga there was time for a quick coffee before changing and going ashore. The cove itself is named after a warship that came here in 1814 and we were here to see some of the ship's names and arrival dates that have been carved into the rocks – most notably 'Phoenix 1836', a year after Charles Darwin landed in this precise spot. As we walked along the ascending trail the views got better and better, looking out over the incense trees, down into Darwin's Lake and across to the cove.



We climbed to the highest point and could see a huge lava field in front of us – from an eruption in the early 1800s, and in the distance Darwin Volcano (which at 1,646 metres is the second highest volcano in the archipelago), and further on from that Wolf Volcano. In the other direction was the island of Fernandina where we will be landing tomorrow and its peak, which at 1,463 metres was hidden in the mist. As we descended, we saw a bright green hummingbird moth and plenty of mockingbirds and ground finches. Once aboard Beluga we grabbed a drink and Ivan the barman put out some freshly prepared (hot) yucca dough with honey – delicious!

Day 12: Fernandina – Punta Espinoza & Isabela – Punta Vicente Roca

Monday 30 May 2022

Weather – overcast but bright.

What an incredible morning we had! At about 6:30, captain Jose moved Beluga across the rich waters of the Bolivar Channel to pull up close to Fernandina. We had wonderful views of the huge domed cone of the volcano, and some wisps of cloud that appeared to be halfway up it ... the sun was beginning to break through the clouds. We had breakfast and boarded the Zodiacs and headed over to our landing site at Punta Espinoza.

We arrived at low tide, so there was a certain amount of delicacy required walking over the rocks in order not to slip. The site was instantly interesting and memorable as our customary sea lion welcoming party launched into the water and playfully danced in the shallows. It wasn't long before we realised that this

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was going to be one of the very best landings of the trip so far (it seems to be a recurring theme!) as we were quite literally tripping over the marine iguanas that were covering the rocks. Avoiding the expansive areas of marine iguana nests, we went to a nearby tree where there was a pair of Galapagos hawks (that mainly prey on the marine iguanas here) and towards the point we could see flightless cormorants.



We were attracted to a nearby call of a flightless cormorant and realised that there was a pair beginning their courtship dance – what a privilege to see it! We watched for 20 minutes or more as they danced around each other both on land and in the water, and then watched the male give the female a large ‘gift’ of seaweed. Over the rocks to get a closer view of the Galapagos hawks and Juan called out “snake” – we rushed over to see a metre long western Galapagos racer snake making its way across the rocks and towards the nearby bushes. There were great piles of marine iguanas, in numbers we’ve not seen before, some of them marching towards the ocean to feed, some of them marching back out having fed, but most of them just lying flat, recharging their batteries and getting warm in the sun. There were hundreds of Sally Lightfoot crabs, more sea lions and yet more marine iguanas.

Having only walked a few hundred metres it was time to head back to the boat for our next activity, but not before tripping over another pair of western Galapagos racer snakes that were close to where our Zodiacs had ‘parked’. Back onboard Beluga we hardly had time to think before we got into our swimming gear and wetsuits, jump into the Zodiacs again and head off for a snorkel. This was snorkelling like no other too ...

There was quite a current, the water was coolish and quite murky, but we got over some shallow rocks covered in green algae, and as soon as we got into the water, we saw marine iguanas feeding, and swimming through the surf – what an incredible sight! As we moved around the rocks there were sea lions playing in the water, penguins, and flightless cormorants whizzing past, and turtles everywhere. Clearly this spot is a marine animal paradise.

Back in the Zodiacs heading to Beluga no one could believe that we had been in the water for a whole hour – it felt like a few minutes, but lunch beckoned, and then we headed off to Punta Vicente Roca almost on the northern tip of Isabela.

We moored up in the bay surrounded by high-sided cliffs – in fact we were within the walls of a caldera with beautiful vertical striations in the rocks that we later discovered were magma extrusions following volcanic activity. There was an hour or so after lunch before it was time to get into the Zodiacs and head over to the cliffs. Lots of brown noddys and blue-footed boobies on the cliff ledges, and the occasional

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great frigatebird. Sadly there was a fairly high swell making it difficult for photography. As we went along the cliff wall, we saw a couple of sealions out on a ledge, and then three large collections of marine iguanas basking on the rocks. Turtles came and went, and as we passed the entrance to a fairly large cave, we saw flightless cormorants and then a young Galapagos fur seal.

It was time to get back to Beluga after an hour or so, and then (only!) 15 minutes later we were back to the same location, but this time in our snorkelling gear. The water was cooler than we had experienced elsewhere, the swell was bigger, and the visibility was poorer (lots of nutrients!), but it was an enjoyable snorkel none the less, though we didn't see as much as we have done on previous snorkelling trips.

By 17:15 most of the group were in the bar and were eagerly anticipating sailing over the equator. The engine slowed, we all went up to the bridge and had a countdown to 0'00.0000N. Pina colodas were served when we got there and Juan – with guitar in hand – began to sing 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor'. The sing-along lasted for half an hour or so, the sun began setting, and we retired to the bar for another drink and dinner. The perfect end to the penultimate full day of our voyage



Day 13: Santiago – Buccaneer Cove & Bartolome – Pinnacle Rock

Tuesday 31 May 2022

Weather – sunny and warm.

Sadly, this was our last full day in the Galapagos – it seems incredible that we have been onboard for 11 nights already. After an early breakfast we explored Buccaneer Cove in the Zodiacs. This was one of the coves that Charles Darwin landed at, and it is likely that little has changed at this cove since he was here. Here there is a gigantic lump of rock on one side of the cove which has the appearance of a whale (with cacti on top!), and another that resembles a monk deep in prayer.

As we rounded the promontory, we were able to see brown noddys on a ledge close to the water, and swallow-tailed gulls. The water was crystal clear, and we worked our way along the cliff face, photographing as we went. As ever, our time disappeared far too quickly, and we were back at Beluga preparing for a snorkelling trip. In fact, we returned to the same cliff face and got in the water at the far end of the cove, working our way back to the promontory with the cliff on our left. The water was absolutely crystal clear and whilst there were no obvious turtles, the first thing that most of us saw when we got in was a white-tipped reef shark (good start!). There were also countless yellow-fin surgeon fish, lots of parrot fish, sea stars and the occasional sea lion that swam past at high speed.

Back on board, there was 45 minutes or so before we had another excellent lunch, but we never got to the end of it because Juan came racing in to tell us that they had seen orcas from the bridge. Everybody abandoned lunch and piled out onto the bow. There were two or three distant orcas on the port side of the boat and another three or four much closer on the starboard side. They were clearly feeding on fish and their location was given away by the Elliot's storm petrels, wedge-tailed storm petrels, Galapagos

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shearwaters, Galapagos petrels and frigatebirds that were amassing above them to take advantage of the large 'bait ball' that must have been near the surface.



The captain Jose did his best to keep them in view and as close to us as possible. By the end of our encounter, we had confirmed that there was an adult male, a young male, at least one female and two youngsters (one of which was a few months old, and the other was about 18 months old). The orcas were clearly catching fish and at one point they celebrated by lobtailing – one of the orcas also breached, though only a couple of people managed to see it. From his observations, Mark said that this was an ecotype of orcas that most closely resembled those in Kamchatka.

We were only 30 minutes or so from our next stop, so at about 14:10 we left them and headed for Bartolome. Here – after Juan and Miguel had encouraged the sleeping sea lions to allow us past – we walked along the boardwalk and up to the viewpoint from which we were able to see and photograph the classic Galapagos scene with Pinnacle Rock in the distance and the two beaches of Bartolome in the middle distance. It seemed a very fitting end to our last full day in the Galapagos.

As soon as we returned to Beluga a team of snorkellers got ready and went straight out for a final snorkel – this time around Pinnacle Rock. Before dinner the captain and his crew came to the bar area for a toast to our voyage. The captain said a few words as did Juan, then Chris and Mark – we all agreed that it was an incredible trip and that we had seen some really amazing things during the course of the past two weeks. After dinner Mark put on a 45-minute slideshow of the trip highlighting all of our key sightings and activities. It was hard to believe that we had really seen and done so much.

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Day 14: North Seymour

Wednesday 1 June 2022

Weather – sunny and warm.

We were up early today for our last landing – this time it was pre-breakfast at 6:00. North Seymour has many of the special things that we have seen on other islands over the past weeks – great, and magnificent frigatebirds nesting, blue-footed boobies nesting, marine iguanas, lava lizards, sea lions and plenty of other wildlife. What a wonderful way to end our holiday.

After 90 minutes or so, we returned to Beluga for breakfast, packed our bags and headed to the airport for our homeward flight with amazing memories, having made new friends and with many photographic reminders of the past two weeks.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12
	BIRDS												
1	Galápagos penguin			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Waved albatross		✓										
3	Galápagos petrel									✓			✓
4	Galápagos shearwater		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Eliot's storm petrel (white-vented)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Wedge-rumped storm petrel												✓
7	Band-rumped storm petrel					✓							
8	Red-billed tropicbird		✓			✓	✓	✓					
9	Flightless cormorant									✓	✓	✓	
10	Brown pelican	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Magnificent frigatebird	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Great frigatebird					✓							
13	Red-footed booby					✓							

14	Nazca booby		✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓
15	Blue-footed booby	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
16	White-cheeked pintail	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓				
17	American (Galapagos) flamingo		✓	✓				✓	✓				
18	Great blue heron			✓			✓		✓				
19	Cattle egret	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓				
20	Lava heron	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Yellow-crowned night heron	✓		✓		✓	✓						✓
22	Galápagos hawk		✓					✓				✓	
23	Galápagos rail						✓						
24	Common gallinule						✓		✓				
25	Purple gallinule							✓					
26	Hudsonian whimbrel						✓						
27	Wandering tattler					✓		✓		✓		✓	
28	Black-necked stilt				✓				✓				
29	Ruddy turnstone			✓		✓							
30	Galapagos (American) oystercatcher		✓										✓
31	Grey plover			✓				✓					

32	Lava gull		✓	✓	✓	✓							
33	Swallow-tailed gull		✓			✓							
34	Common noddy		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Galápagos dove		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				
36	Smooth-billed ani			✓	✓		✓				✓		
37	Vermillion flycatcher								✓				
38	Galápagos flycatcher	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		
39	Galápagos mockingbird				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
40	Espanola mockingbird		✓										
41	San Cristobal mockingbird	✓											
42	Yellow warbler	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
43	Large ground finch					✓							
44	Medium ground finch	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		
45	Small ground finch	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
46	Sharp-beaked ground finch					✓							
47	Common cactus finch				✓								
48	Large cactus finch					✓							
49	Large tree finch								✓				

50	Medium tree finch			✓									
51	Small tree finch				✓		✓						
52	Woodpecker finch							✓					
	MAMMALS												
1	Galápagos sea lion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Galápagos fur seal					✓						✓	✓
3	Orca												✓
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS												
1	San Cristobal giant tortoise	✓											
2	Sierra negra giant tortoise							✓			✓		
3	Santa Cruz giant tortoise						✓						
4	Green sea turtle	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Marine iguana (San Cristobal)	✓											
6	Marine iguana (Espanola & Floreana)		✓	✓									
7	Marine iguana(Santa Cruz)				✓		✓						✓
8	Marine iguana (Santiago)				✓	✓		✓					✓
9	Marine iguana (Genovesa)					✓							
10	Marine iguana (Isabela & Fernandina)								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

11	Land iguana				✓						✓		
12	Isabela lava lizard								✓		✓	✓	
13	Espanola lava lizard		✓										
14	Floreana lava lizard			✓									
15	Santa Cruz lava lizard				✓		✓					✓	
16	Santiago lava lizard				✓			✓				✓	
17	Western Galapagos racer											✓	
	SPIDERS, BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS & BEES												
1	Silver argiope (spider)			✓	✓								
2	Galapagos blue butterfly			✓			✓						
3	Monarch butterfly			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Long-tailed skipper				✓		✓		✓		✓		
5	Sulphur butterfly				✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		
6	Hummingbird moth										✓		
7	Hawk moth										✓		
8	Queen butterfly										✓		
9	Galapagos painted locust				✓								
10	Paper wasp								✓				

11	Galapagos carpenter bee				✓		✓		✓				
	CRABS, EELS, FISH, RAYS & SHARKS												
1	4-eyed blenny				✓								
2	Bi-coloured parrotfish							✓					
3	Black-stripped snapper		✓	✓						✓		✓	✓
4	Black-tipped reef shark								✓				
5	Blue & golden snapper				✓								
6	Blue sea star			✓									
7	Blue-chinned parrotfish		✓	✓							✓	✓	✓
8	Bullseye pufferfish				✓			✓	✓				✓
9	Coral fish		✓	✓									
10	Cortez rainbow wrasse				✓			✓					
11	Cow-nosed golden ray							✓					
12	Dusky chubb										✓		
13	Flag cabrilla								✓		✓		✓
14	Galapagos bullseye shark									✓	✓		
15	Galapagos giant horse conch										✓		
16	Galapagos mullet					✓							

17	Galapagos octopus							✓					✓
18	Galapagos shark			✓	✓								
19	Galapagos snake eel												✓
20	Golden sea bass									✓	✓		
21	Golden-rimmed surgeonfish				✓								
22	Green sea urchin							✓					
23	Guineafowl pufferfish (yellow phase)			✓			✓			✓	✓		✓
24	Harlequin wrasse										✓		
25	Hermit crab										✓		
26	Hyroglyphic hawkfish					✓							✓
27	King angelfish		✓									✓	✓
28	Long-tailed stingray			✓			✓					✓	✓
29	Manta ray							✓			✓		
30	Marbled ray			✓									
31	Mexican anemone										✓		
32	Mexican chocolate-chip sea star			✓				✓					
33	Mexican streamer hogfish							✓			✓	✓	
34	Moorish idol					✓							

35	Needle sea urchin			✓							✓		
36	Pacific creole fish												✓
37	Pacific cushion sea star							✓					
38	Panamic sargent major				✓	✓							
39	Pencil sea urchin										✓		
40	Pencil-spine sea urchin		✓	✓							✓		
41	Pink cardinalfish		✓	✓									✓
42	Red snapper									✓			
43	Sally Lightfoot crab	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Sand sea star												✓
45	Scalloped hammerhead					✓							
46	Spiney sea urchin										✓		
47	Spot-finned blowfish				✓								
48	Spotted eagle ray									✓			
49	White sea urchin												✓
50	White-rimmed damselfish												✓
51	White-tipped reef shark		✓	✓			✓	✓			✓		✓
52	Yellow-fin tuna									✓			

