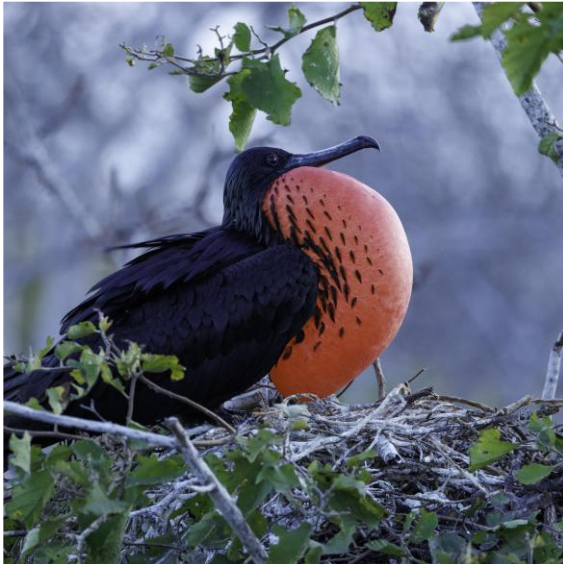


Tour Report

Ecuador – Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine
24 July – 6 August 2025



Tour Leaders: Chris Breen & Mark Carwardine

Our private 12-night charter of the vessel Beluga saw us travelling the eastern, central and western islands in comfort, with our naturalist guide Juan Tapia bringing the remote archipelago's wildlife and geology to life throughout, and with Mark Carwardine and Chris Breen adding photography tips, tricks and workshops, as well as evening presentations and talks.

We explored the islands on land and sea with highlights including snorkel excursions most days (with penguins, turtles, marine iguanas, sharks, rays, flightless cormorants and an array of colour fish). We walked across lava fields, discovered pristine sea-lion strewn beaches, witnessed waved albatrosses courtship behaviour, bird-rich brackish lagoons, giant tortoises and land iguanas. It was a feast for the senses and there really is nowhere else in the world quite like it. Where else in the world is wildlife 'guaranteed'? Where else in the world is it necessary to step over blue-footed boobies in order to continue along a path, and where else can you see your own reflection when photographing the eye of a swallow-tailed gull?

This is a busy, but hugely rewarding, schedule with mind-blowing wildlife experiences from the word go!

Day 1:

Thursday 24 July 2025

London Heathrow to Quito

Most of the group were already in Quito and everyone met as a group in the bar café at 6.00pm, made our various introductions and then a number of us headed round the corner in the main square to a lovely restaurant on the first floor overlooking the plaza.



The food was excellent, the company was excellent, and the mood was upbeat and excited in respect of our departure for San Cristobal Island in the Galapagos archipelago first thing tomorrow morning...

Day 2:

Friday 25 July 2025

Quito to San Cristobal, board Beluga & visit El Junco

Everyone was in the hotel lobby shortly before 5am in order to pick up a packed lunch and board the bus for our departure to the airport. At this time of day (before the rush hour begins) it is a 40-minute journey and we arrived at the airport in plenty of time. With bags unloaded from the bus, we went through the bio-security check and then went through to check-in and dropped our bags before heading through security to the air side and boarding the flight.

The journey isn't long – it is 30 minutes or so to Guayaquil and then just under two hours to San Cristobal. As we disembarked we could feel the warmth, but we were here at the beginning of the summer and there was a light mist and some light rain in the air. We paid our entrance fee to the Galapagos National Park and then waited in the arrivals hall for our bags.

It is an interesting (if unusual) wait because the bags are taken off the carousel and lined up with everyone watching, and then a sniffer dog patrols the bags to check for unwelcome foodstuffs, drugs and other 'undesirables'. That job out of the way, it was time to gather our gear and head out to the coach – our bags were going off to Beluga separately.

It is a short journey to the harbour (only 5 minutes or so) and the tide was out when we arrived but there were a few Galapagos sea lions sleeping on the sand. Overhead there were magnificent frigatebirds, and we saw our first blue-footed booby too. There was a big male sea lion at the bottom of the ramp to the jetty when we got there. He was sound asleep, enjoying the warmth and the sound of the ocean (possibly!).

When the pangas from Beluga arrived at the jetty we put on our lifejackets and jumped aboard – eight people in one panga, seven in the other – and sped across to Beluga.

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We took our hand baggage to our rooms, our hold bags followed shortly after, and we then sat down for our first on-board meal (tomato and avocado salad, with beetroot, corn, rice and beef stew, and of course a vegetarian and vegan option too. After lunch, Juan (our naturalist guide for the trip) gave us a short briefing on what to expect later today.



After lunch, there was a bit of time to relax before we boarded the pangas at around 2.30pm and went back to port. The coach we were due to use had 'gone technical' so we split ourselves between two smaller vehicles and drove the 30 minutes to El Junco. The weather was quite over cast and drizzly so whilst we walked up shallow-side of the caldera and saw a few interesting birds along the way – yellow warbler and small ground finch particularly – we decided once we reach the rim of the caldera that the inclement weather (and lack of visibility!) meant that a walk around the rim was probably not the best use of our time. Instead we walked back down the crater side, jumped back into the vehicles and went off to the tortoise breeding centre at La Galapaguera. We saw a number of San Cristobal tortoises (both large and small) and photographed San Cristobal mockingbird, small ground finch and a couple of very obliging yellow warblers.



Our time here over, we returned to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno and had 45 minutes to look around this small town and stop in a local bar for a beer. We returned to the jetty and to our pangas for the short ride over to Beluga.

Dinner was served at 7.30pm and was followed by a briefing for tomorrow's activities and a safety briefing from Juan out on the bow... then it was time for bed!

Day 3:

Saturday 26 July 2025

Gardner Bay & Punta Suarez, Espanola



It was a 'late' morning and we were up for a breakfast of cereals, fresh fruit, ham and eggs at 7am. Then at 8am we were in the pangas heading towards the beach at Gardner Bay. This pristine white sand beach is home to a healthy population of Galapagos sea lions, and they were there to greet us on arrival. It was our first wet landing of the trip too, and Juan demonstrated how it was done as we approached the beach. It wasn't warm, there was a light mist and a slight drizzle which lifted shortly after we landed.

Once disembarked we headed up to the top of the beach, left our lifejackets and were free to walk along the extent of the beach looking at the wildlife. The first and most notable of the birds we saw was the Española mockingbird – the second of the endemic mockingbirds in the past two days! There were plenty of them – some young apparently chasing parents and asking for food, and others fighting in territorial disputes.

The sea lions on the beach were a constant source of interest, coating their fur in sand as a way of keeping off irritating insects.

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Most people managed to get to the far end of the beach where the rocks began to dominate, and where there were plenty of Sally lightfoot crabs. There were a few magnificent frigatebirds swirling over the sea, and on land small ground finch, Española ground finch and Galapagos dove. Overhead we had a couple of good sightings of Galapagos hawk too.

At 10am it was time to gather on the beach and return to Beluga where freshly made juice was waiting for us. We had a break of 30 minutes or so before Cesar fitted everyone out with a wetsuit, mask, snorkel and fins and we upped anchor and

headed the short distance to our first snorkelling site of the trip at nearby Islote Gardener.

There were a few in the group who were less confident with snorkelling but (almost) everyone got in the water (one observed from the panga) and as is so often the case in the Galapagos, it was a magical snorkelling trip. Within a couple of minutes of everyone being in the water we were treated to the antics of an inquisitive sea lion that was swimming pirouettes around us – nibbling our fins and taking great interest in the underwater cameras!



We gently snorkelled along the rocks taking in beautifully coloured fish, more sea lions and our first marine iguana, as well as brown pelicans and a couple of swallow-tailed gulls. All too soon our 45 minutes were up, and it was time to get back into the pangas and back to Beluga for lunch.

After lunch and a break of an hour or two we were back in the pangas and heading over to Punta Suarez – one of the most spectacular landing sites in the Galapagos.



As we arrived at our landing at Punta Suarez it was immediately obvious that with a large sea lion sleeping in the middle of the path we were going to have to change our plans. So instead of landing at the steps we crossed to the other side of the beach and had a slightly more treacherous landing over the volcanic rocks.



Sea lions were on the beach and marine iguanas were warming themselves on the rocks. As we walked along the path we came across Española lava lizards, Galapagos doves, small ground and Española ground finches – it was ‘slow going’ for all of the very best reasons. The view out to the ocean is particularly beautiful with nesting Nazca boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and the occasional blue-footed booby along the way as well. There was suddenly a call of “Galapagos hawk” and one flew low over everyone’s heads and landed a couple of metres away on a bush – it stayed until after we had taken hundreds of photos and moved on to other things. When does that ever happen in Europe?

But, it was the waved albatrosses that stole the show this afternoon – some had newly hatched chicks which quite simply looked like large balls of fluff! The light was exceptional and the ochre-yellow colour on the top of the albatross’s heads looked resplendent.

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Before we reached the furthest point on our walk we spent quite a long time with a pair of blue-footed boobies that were displaying to one another, but were clearly rather inexperienced as the male attempted to mount the female and fell off! So... maybe the boobies stole the show and not the albatrosses – it is difficult to say. What a lovely problem.

At the furthest point on our walk we sat on the cliff edge, looking at the sea below us being forced up through a blowhole in the rocks as albatrosses and red-billed tropicbirds cruised past and the light just seemed to get better and better.

We had to draw ourselves away from this exceptional landing site finally and return to Beluga. Everyone grabbed a drink and headed up to the sun deck for our first 'sundowners' (even though the clouds had obscured the sun!) and we saw green turtle and white-storm petrels as we chatted.



Before dinner Juan introduced us to the Beluga crew and then we sat down to dinner.

Dinner was followed by a briefing about tomorrow's activities and then it was time to retire for the night. It was the end of our first full day in the Galapagos – and it was a day to remember!

Day 4:

Sunday 27 July 2025

Punta Cormorant & Post Office Bay, Floreana

It was an earlier start this morning with breakfast at 6.30am and a departure for Punta Cormorant at 7.30am. The sky was overcast and the temperature was coolish.. As ever we were greeted by sea lions at our landing (a wet landing) on the beach. It is volcanic here (rather than oceanic) so the sand is dark.

We walked a short way along the beach and then turned inland, past a couple of female Floreana lava lizards, and down to the fringes of the brackish lagoon where we saw some great birds including semi-palmated plover, ruddy turnstone, black-winged stilt and a small group of Galapagos (American) flamingos. Four adults and four young, fluffy chicks that were only a couple of weeks old. The photographers in the group spent quite a bit of time photographing some nearby white-cheeked pintails that were feeding literally a couple of metres away.



In the distance on the other side of the lagoon we noticed another fluffy chick (similarly aged) and then on closer inspection, there was another chick that was about half the size and was maybe only a couple of days old – they were standing near what appeared to be an abandoned nest, and there was an egg visible on the nest.

We moved on from the lagoon to a slightly raised vantage point overlooking the lagoon from where we could see a few more flamingoes, but also a beautiful view of the lagoon and its surrounds. A few cattle egrets flew past at one point and a few of the group also caught sight of a dark-billed cuckoo, and a Galapagos flycatcher.

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Then we walked over a small 'isthmus' to the other side of the island and to a completely different beach, this time made from oceanic material. Whilst this is sometimes a good beach to see sting rays feeding very close to the shore only a few in the group saw one. We made our way to the end of the beach where we had tremendous views of a hunting lava heron, and then walked back along the beach. As we approached the end of the beach, we had a great sighting of a Sally lightfoot crab blowing bubble foam over its body in preparation to moult its shell.

We headed back to our landing beach and waited for the pangas to arrive before returning to Beluga.

Our snorkelling excursion at Devil's Crown was next, and it didn't disappoint. There was half an hour or so between activities and then we were back in the pangas – wet suits on – heading to the 'upstream' side of Devil's Crown. On instruction from Juan, we jumped into the water and drifted with the current. In addition to a myriad of colourful fish, we were lucky enough to see white-tipped reef sharks and a number of green turtles.

Back on board there was time for a shower before lunch and a siesta!

We departed Beluga at 3pm and headed for Baroness Bay - with four double-kayaks in tow and eight enthusiastic kayakers.

It was quite windy and the water surface was 'ruffled' but the kayakers transferred from pangas to kayaks and for the next 50 minutes kayaked around the bay, looking at sea lions and watching as the heads of green turtles popped above the surface.

After the kayaking excursion we headed back to Beluga to drop them off and then transferred across to Post Office Bay, where Juan told us a (true) story of a toothless dentist and her sexual slaves that lived on the island many years ago.



This wonderful bay is home to the very first post office in Ecuador, a place where sailors would leave their letters in a box for them to be collected by other passing sailors and taken to their destination. The tradition continues with a barrel that people leave postcards in that we looked through to see if there were any near where we lived... so that we could take them home and hand deliver them.

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From there we walked further inland and most of the group walked down into a lava tunnel. Then, exhausted after another excellent day, we walked back to the beach, the light by now had turned into an exceptional golden colour that we'd not seen on the trip so far. As we were getting ready to board the pangas, there were a couple of yellow warblers that were tantalizingly flitting among the bushes at the back of the beach and occasionally appearing on exposed branches for a photograph.



We returned to Beluga for a shower, a drink in the last light on the sun deck, and dinner.

After dinner Juan gave us a short briefing for tomorrow's activities and while most of the group then headed off to bed, the keen photographers stayed up to review and process images.

It had been a great day!

Day 5:

Monday 28 July 2025

Dragon Hill, Santa Cruz & Puerto Egas, Santiago



Today got off to a great start with breakfast at 6am and a landing on the north-west side of Santa Cruz (at Dragon Hill) at 7am. A dry (but quite slippery) landing brought us to a small white sand bay – no sea lions, amazingly! Through, and past a small 'woodland' of cactus and we were onto a long sandy beach with rocky outcrops. The first 'spot' was of a lava lizard using the black lava rocks as a hunting perch. There were plenty of Sally lightfoot crabs and a couple of yellow warblers too. The light was wonderfully crisp

We continued along the trail to a large, brackish lagoon on our left with some white-cheeked pintails on it, there was also a grey plover in the distance. As we walked along the trail we saw Galapagos painted locusts (they are quite prevalent!) and the (almost) ubiquitous small ground finch.

Slowly, slowly we continued until we saw a land iguana (female) lying low in the scrub off to the right-hand side of the trail. It was positioned so that most of the group were able to get a few photos of it, but we were hopeful of an iguana in a better position further along the track. Carpenter bees and saffron butterflies adorned the bushes as we carried on to the ridge which had magnificent views to the north towards the smaller Guy Fawkes islands and Santiago.



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As we paused here a Galapagos flycatcher and a yellow warbler flitted about the trees.

We headed on down and as we turned the corner there was a large male land iguana lying in the middle of the path, and on closer look there was a female very close by, just off the path to the left. Moving as quietly as possible we were able to get within about four metres of them both and just observe what they were doing. The male was clearly interested in mating so was manoeuvring himself slowly, and the female seemed rather non-plussed by it! It can take many hours for the mating ritual to take place, so pictures taken it was time to carry on. It is staggering how unconcerned the wildlife of the Galapagos is, and these two iguanas were no exception – one lying on the track, the other nearby in the scrub – simply carrying on ‘iguana life’ as normal.



Almost at the end of the trail we found another lying in the middle of the track – this was perhaps the best situated of all of them and we spent a good 20 minutes watching and photographing it before moving on, leaving it exactly as we found it.

We had plenty of time left at our landing, so we sat at the back of the beach for a while watching Sally lightfoot crabs on the rocks, a great blue heron and the occasional blue-footed boobies diving into the sea. Juan suggested that we walk along the beach and clamber over the volcanic rocks at the end in order to reach another beautiful white sand beach on the other side. It is actually along another trail that is rarely used and one that Juan hadn't been on for 15 years. The beach on the other side was equally magical, with soft white sand underfoot. The pangas collected us from here and we returned to Beluga at about 10.30 after a fabulous morning.



A few of the group wanted to have a swim before lunch so at 11am there was a safety panga waiting just off the starboard side and those who wanted to dived into the cool, crystal clear water and did a couple of laps around Beluga. A refreshing pause before another delicious lunch was served at midday.

We had two whole hours to write diaries, siesta, birdwatch from the sundeck or process images before we got ready for our 3pm snorkelling excursion. The sun was shining, it was a warm afternoon and we headed over to the fringe of Sullivan Bay to take to the water. With the island on our left we worked our way along the shallows looking at some beautiful schools of colourful fish, a white-tipped reef shark, and (for the select few only!!) three Galapagos penguins. The water was ‘fairly

clear’ although it was obviously thick with plankton.

Our snorkel ended as we approached the beach and we returned to Beluga to prepare for our final landing of the day on the lava fields. The lava is from an eruption that took place 127 years ago – of course well after Charles Darwin's time. But the beautiful rope-like ribbons of lava make an intense and striking black colouration that sets off anything that grows nearby, or that lands on it. Overhead were three Galapagos hawks (possible parents with recently fledged young, though it was difficult to tell at a distance) calling, a

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fabulous lava heron that greeted us at our landing, and one or two yellow warblers.

As the sun began to go down we lay on the pahoehoe (the name for the rope-like lava) and took a group photo. That done, we headed back to the pangas and back to Beluga. A delicious dinner was served at 7pm after which Juan ran through the plan for tomorrow, and after that Mark did a short presentation about the Galapagos (a conclusion of the talk from a couple of nights ago).

Finally, as our captain Jose began the engines and set us on course for the island of Genovesa in the north-east of the archipelago, it was time to retire for the night exhausted after another excellent day.

Day 6:

Tuesday 29 July 2025

Darwin Bay & Prince Phillip's Steps, Genovesa

We woke up in Darwin Bay and by 5.50am everyone was up (though not necessarily bright-eyed!) and ready for breakfast. By 7am we were in the pangas and heading over to the beach for the beginning of one of the very best days of all on the trip. The distance we cover and the area we visit is minimal, but it is arguably one of the finest landings in the whole archipelago.

Sea lions on the beach (of course), and lots of swallow-tailed gulls, red-footed boobies, some Nazca boobies and plenty of Galapagos doves. It is impossible to accurately describe the scene, but the volume of wildlife and the proximity of wildlife is simply exceptional.

There were swallow-tailed gulls standing in the middle of the path as we walked around the short loop, as well as nesting on ledges the rocky walls and at low level on the red mangroves. Some of the many red-footed boobies are actually a white-morph, but with the distinctive red feet and their beautiful powder blue bills.

On the greenery were two of the three species of Darwin's finch that are found on the island – Genovesa ground finch and large ground finch, and there were Genovesa cactus finches on the cacti!



We walked around a little further to the great frigatebirds. There were plenty at low level on the bushes, males, females and young, and overhead was a cacophony of frigatebirds, boobies and gulls. It really is quite extraordinary being at eye-level with such large birds that don't have any fear or concern about us being present.



As we moved on some of the group had sightings of a wandering tattler, there was also a pair of lava gulls in the sky – a great sighting but unfortunately they didn't land – and both lava heron and yellow-crowned night heron. We continued on past the mangrove 'home' to scores more red-footed boobies on one side, and the volcanic wall on the other until we reached a crystal clear natural pool with a handful of excitable and playful sea lions.

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Some of the group continued the walk up to the cliff top to enjoy the view of Darwin's Bay while others photographed the almost biblical scenes of flora and fauna, or sat on the beach soaking it all up, or sketched.

We were incredibly lucky because whilst there was one other group that visited the site for a short period whilst we were there, for most of our landing we were the only visitors in the incredibly special place. Mark and Chris have been to Darwin's Bay in Genovesa an number of times in the past, and both agreed that without doubt, this was the very best visit to this site they've had.

We finally got back on board Beluga just after 11am after a staggering four hours of simply exceptional wildlife viewing. Lunch was at 12noon and after a brief siesta (or a session processing images, enjoying the sundeck or reading!), we once again boarded the pangas to head over to El Barranco (Prince Phillip's Steps). Another of the great highlights of any trip to the Galapagos.



The panga took us across the bay from Beluga, and as we approached the landing site, we drove close to the cliff face and saw a Galapagos fur seal in the water and another sleeping in the crevice of the rocks. Nesting Galapagos shearwaters were flying around above us, as were red-billed tropicbirds, great frigatebirds and Nazca boobies.

Once at the top of the steps, Juan gave us a quick briefing and we made our way along the trail. This is an exceptional site, a feast for the senses from the moment you get to the top of the steps. There are scores of nesting great frigatebirds the Nazca boobies are either sitting on eggs, feeding their fluffy white chicks, gently bringing their partners gifts of sticks and small stones or flying low overhead. And the air is full of the sound of birds – Galapagos mockingbirds, boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and red-billed tropicbirds.



We walked as far along the trail as we could, past the bushes and out onto an open, rocky area where the air was alive with wedge-rumped (or Galapagos) storm-petrels, tropicbirds and frigatebirds, and our mission here was to find Galapagos short-eared owl. It took some looking, but after 15 or 20 minutes we finally succeeded with a distant (but good) view of an owl apparently watching (with a view to hunting) wedge-rumped storm-petrels. Not everyone was lucky enough to see the owl, but Chris saw a second – also a fair distance away – and most of the group managed to see it. But, further along the trail Juan spotted a third short-eared owl that was sleeping under a rocky ledge. Everyone

was able to get close enough to get some great photos, and we left the owl as we found it... both eyes (almost) closed, and completely undisturbed.

As the light level was dropping we returned to the landing site, boarded the pangas and before returning to Beluga had another look at the shearwaters and the Galapagos fur seal. Back on board there was time for a shower before another delicious dinner after which Juan gave everyone a briefing in respect of tomorrow and Mark did a short presentation of photographic tips and tricks.

It was the end of another fabulous day.

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Day 7:

The Highlands & Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz

Wednesday 30 July 2025

Chris and Mark had been woken in the middle of the night by the captain (Jose) and Juan to say that there was a tsunami warning following an earthquake in Kamchatka (north Pacific) and that unless we were on land by 7am (at the very latest) then we would have to stay onboard Beluga all day as the navy had said it was unsafe to be ashore. As a result, our planned activity to Black Turtle Cove was going to be abandoned.



Many of the group had seen the tsunami warnings so it was no great surprise when they announced that we would have breakfast at 6am and head straight to shore. We didn't have a great deal of time to spare though and arrived at the jetty just before 7am.

We boarded a bus that took us to the highlands via two sinkholes, Los Gemelos, twenty minutes away. We approached the first 70 metre deep sinkhole via a narrow pathway and Juan pointed out waist-high ferns, quinine bushes, and giant daisy trees whilst small ground finches busied themselves nearby.

We also added green warbler finch and small tree finch to our bird list before following a trail into a cool, shaded section of woodland on the other side of the road to see the other of the two sinkholes.

Continuing on, we drove to El Chato Ranch to see giant tortoises in the wild. Photographing them and enjoying their proximity, we learnt about their life cycles and passed a pond where a few were partially submerged. Walking for over an hour, we came across more and more before arriving back at the reception area where some of the group indulged in a little retail therapy whilst others tried the local lemongrass tea, or freshly brewed coffee.



We continued on to Enchanted Lodge for a delicious lunch and at 1pm we were off again, this time to Puerto Ayora. We headed straight for the Charles Darwin Research Centre which was established in 1959. Some of the group visited 'Lonesome George', the last La Pinta giant tortoise who died in 2012 and who is now preserved at the centre. We also visited the Information Centre where many of the conservation projects currently being worked on are detailed on billboards and include minimising ship collisions with turtles, the removal of alien invasives, monitoring sharks and re-wilding areas.



Everyone was free to wander through the centre and enjoy it at their own pace, and afterwards many 'ended up' in the handmade chocolate shop and bought some delicious treats.

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At 5.30pm we gathered near the dock, boarded the bus and headed back to the north side of the island where the pangas were waiting to return us to Beluga.

Back on board, we enjoyed a delicious dinner and then retired for an early night after an excellent day.

Day 8:
Sombrero Chino & Rabida

Thursday 31 July 2025



How is it that every day is both so different, and so amazing?

We began with breakfast at 7am and then landed on Sombrero Chino (or Chinese Hat) – named due to the shape of the island for a couple of hours at 8am. Although there isn't a huge amount of wildlife to see here, there is plenty to enjoy and photograph. First up was a very young (a couple of weeks old) Galapagos sea lion that was alone on the volcanic rocks keeping himself happy by watching us all go past. He was the ultimate 'cute' young animal with a fur coat that looked a little too big, large round eyes and an appealing face. The photographers had a field day!

Clare pointed out a Galapagos hawk that had been fairly close to the landing site (that none of us had seen) but that had flown across the channel and was perched atop a rocky outcrop on Santiago. It was distant, but distinctive.

Along the trail were a couple of small female lava lizards peering out over the ocean and some marine iguanas posing beautifully.

We commented on the subtle greens, oranges and reds of the salt bush and tried to use them as a backdrop for some of the photographs. At the end of the trail we were able to sit and watch an American oystercatcher foraging amongst the rocks, bright red and blue Sally lightfoot crabs on the dark volcanic rocks and brown boobies cruising around the headland.



As the morning light was overcast the photography was tremendous, but it was time to return to Beluga for a short break before heading back out to snorkel in the channel.

Sombrero Chino lies very close to the north-west side of Santiago – and the warmish sea is a spectacular colour of turquoise. We were only onboard Beluga for about 30 minutes – just enough time to get prepared for the snorkelling activity and then we were off. The crystal-clear water in this part of the archipelago is home to a myriad of fish and snorkelling here is really like snorkelling in a gigantic tropical fish tank. The waters are relatively shallow with a sandy floor.

There were a couple of white-tipped reef sharks, and some large schools of colourful fish, but the most notable was a large male sea lion that came straight over to us almost as soon as we got in the water, and seemed to enjoy our company for the whole of the snorkelling session. He showed us all of his tricks – swimming upside down, hanging in the water, somersaults, staring at us upside down, and reversing out of the water without seeming to move a muscle! Right at the end of the snorkel we came to a small rocky alcove where there were a few sea lions including a small one posing on a rock half in the water and half out. What a lovely way to end the snorkelling excursion.

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sugar hit)!

Lunch was nearly ready when we boarded Beluga after which we motored for an hour or so over to Rabida for our second snorkelling excursion of the day. Rusty-red coloured rock wall and a dark sandy sea floor is how this snorkelling site appears. It was quite cool when we got in the water but the colourful fish soon took our minds off that! We didn't see any sea lions but there were a couple of white-tipped reef sharks and a huge number of sea stars.

Back on board Cesar had prepared hot chocolate and marshmallows for us – very welcome warmth (and a

Our last excursion of the day was to the dark red sandy beach on Rabida and the brackish lagoon that sits just behind the beach. As we boarded the pangas we could see Galapagos shearwaters circling and both brown pelicans and brown noddies flying low over the water. We passed the promontory and along the rocky wall that we had just snorkelled and landed on the beach. Although we could just about see some flamingoes in the lagoon behind the beach, we walked along the beach for 100 metres or so, stopping to photograph an American oystercatcher that was foraging in the surf. Then we turned in towards the lagoon – white-cheeked pintails were on the lagoon, and in the far corner half a dozen American flamingoes. But... the notable bird was none of the above, it was a stationary, nesting oystercatcher that Natalie had noticed, which everyone else in the group had walked past, right by the path. We turned our attention towards it!

Some of the group stayed to enjoy photography by the lagoon (particularly of the oystercatcher) while others went on the loop trail up the hill. Whilst there were wonderful views from the hill top – across both bays – we also had small and large ground finch, cactus finch, magnificent frigatebird and even a pair of Galapagos hawks circling overhead.

The sun was setting and it was time to return to the pangas, but as we did, the sun appeared from below the clouds and immediately turned everything a rich shade of rusty red... it wasn't like for long of course... and then we were back onboard.

After dinner we enjoyed looking at images from almost everyone in the group and reminisced about some of the incredible sightings that we had over the course of the past week.

Another wonderful day.



Day 9:

Sierra Negra & Puerto Villamil, Isabela

Friday 1 August 2025

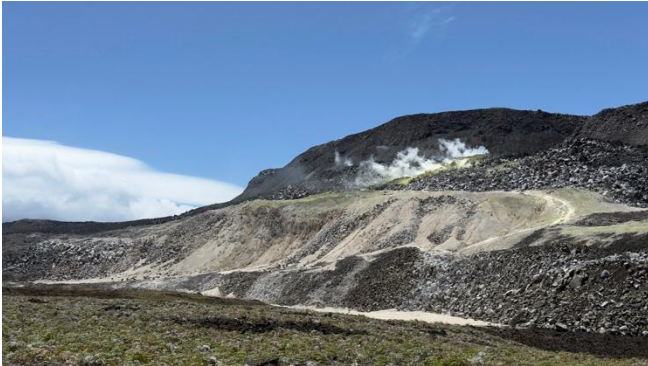
Today we were up (marginally) later than on previous days – with breakfast at 7am – but by 8am we had boarded the pangas for the short journey through the boats moored in the harbour, to the jetty. There were sea lions on some of the steps of another jetty, and sea lions on a couple of nearby benches as we walked from the jetty to our waiting bus for the 30-minute bus ride to the park headquarters near the rim of the caldera at Sierra Negra.

It was pretty cool, quite drizzly and rather cloudy on arrival, but we went for a short walk to see if we could see vermillion (also known as 'Darwin's') flycatcher. We succeeded with a couple, but unfortunately they were both female, and not the striking red and black males.

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We wandered back to the park HQ and boarded the bus again for a 12-kilometre bus ride to the north-western side of the caldera. It was shrouded in cloud but we parked the bus and all but two of the group decided to walk down to the crater floor. The walk to the crater floor, and then up to the smoking fumaroles took around an hour.



The landscape was fascinating – as we descended the crater side we were walking through fields of ferns, and once at the bottom of the crater we were amongst gigantic dark coloured volcanic boulders. We could see the smoke coming out of the rocks higher up, so we walked across the magnesium and ash-covered crater floor and then ascended to just below where the fumaroles were. Continual plumes of cloudy smoke were coming from the rocks, and all around the area the rocks were covered in a sulphur yellow coloured sheen. By now the sky was a rich and

deep colour blue and the day had significantly warmed up.

We spent a little time here, had a group photo and then began the walk down from the fumaroles, onto the crater floor and back up the side of the crater to where we began. Overall our walk was a couple of hours and completely different from anything that we have done on the trip thus far. Back at the top, we all sat under a shady tree and had a picnic looking out to the west over the thick cloud layer that had enveloped the land below. We could see the mountain slopes and the peak of Volcán Cerro Azul in the distance.



Our picnic over, we jumped back into the bus to head back to the park headquarters and down to sea level and Puerto Azul again where we spent the rest of the afternoon – walking along the beach front, exploring the small town, or drinking a cocoloco in a beachside bar.

When it was time to go, we headed back to the jetty by bus and boarded the pangas for the short journey across to Beluga.

It was certainly a different day from all of the others we've had on the trip!

Day 10:

Punta Moreno & Elizabeth Bay, Isabela

Saturday 2 August 2025

This was a totally different day from all of the others – no landings! It was pangas, snorkelling, and more pangas, and it was fantastic!

Our first excursion was around Punta Moreno which is the central south-western coast of Isabela. It is a fairly desolate landscape of pristine brackish lagoons which are a magnet for wildlife.

The sky was bright, and blue; it was a little windy and there was obviously quite a current. In the distance we could see Sierra Negra which we had been to yesterday, and also Cerro Azul that was standing proudly above the clouds when we had our picnic lunch yesterday. To our north we could see the outline of the island of Fernandina which we will visit the day after tomorrow.

Breakfast at 7am seemed almost luxurious by comparison with some of our earlier starts, and we were in the pangas by 8am and heading towards the mangroves. As we began cruising around the mangrove lagoons keeping our voices as low as possible in order not to disturb any wildlife we had fabulous sightings of a squadron of about a dozen spotted eagle rays (one was particularly large and appeared to lead the group)

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and a pair of much smaller golden cow-nosed rays that were moving with them.

We had stunning views of a couple of brown noddies sitting on a rock – facing into the wind so as not to be blown off, and then a huge congregation of (possibly) hundreds of marine iguanas sunning themselves on a rock, many of them with their tails hanging loosely over the water. Next up were flightless cormorants – the only such cormorants in the world – and two particular pairs, both of which were nesting on different rocks and both of which were bringing seaweed gifts to one another.



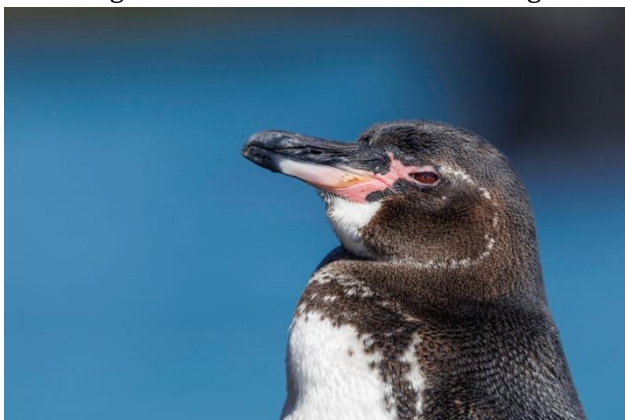
With the panga ride over, we got ready for our first snorkel on this western side of the archipelago. It was sunny, though not especially warm and, being on the western side the Cromwell Current brings cooler water, so our snorkelling excursion wasn't a warm one either, in fact it was decidedly chilly – but it didn't matter. Almost as soon as we got in the water we were aware that there was a simply gigantic bait ball of sardines that we were simming amongst. There must have been millions and millions of sardines and it was like swimming into a wall – it was quite incredible. There were frigatebirds overhead pulling sardines out of the water right in front of our eyes, and flightless cormorants that were diving into the bait ball and taking sardines as we watched too. None of us had witnessed anything quite like it before. The cold sea and chilly conditions were immediately forgotten and it was almost impossible to draw ourselves away from the bait ball... but when we did, we were greeted by the ubiquitous sea lions seemingly desperate to attract our attention, and green turtles feeding on the sea grasses below us. This was, without doubt, the most fascinating snorkel of the trip so far.

We were back onboard Beluga for lunch at 12noon and then we motored the short distance to Elizabeth Bay where we once again boarded the pangas and headed off into the mangroves but were stopped in our tracks by a Galapagos penguin that was standing on (and facing!) a rocky outcrop. Above the penguin was a huge marine iguana apparently oblivious to the photographer's attention to the penguin.



Whilst one group were enjoying the penguin, the other panga was with a pair of flightless cormorants performing the most beautiful courtship ritual on the water – swimming around one another in circles, crossing their beaks, swimming after each other, and repeating the moves again and again. It was an intimate insight into the private life of this pair of cormorants.

As we motored into the mangroves we came across a group of pengions feeding in open water – they weren't concerned about us. Some of them looked as though they were snorkelling – lying on the surface peering into the water to see the fish, then disappearing to catch one. Nearby were brown pelicans fishing, and in the background blue-footed boobies diving into the water from a great height. What a place!



Once we were deep in the mangroves the panga drivers turned off their engines and we silently paddled looking at birds and seeing green turtles in the waters below us.

We were back on board Beluga by around 5.30pm and were able to enjoy a couple of drinks before dinner. After dinner, and after Juan had briefed us on tomorrow's activities Mark did part one of a presentation about Charles Darwin. Then it was finally time for bed after another wildlife-packed day.

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Day 11:

Urbina Bay & Targus Cove, Isabela

Sunday 3 August 2025



You've heard it before, but every day on this trip is different to every other, and today (yet again) proved the point. We had a leisurely start to the day with breakfast at 7am and a wet landing on the beach at 8am. The beach is steep and with the swell it was quite a challenge to get onto land without getting soaked.

Once on shore we walked around the beach to the left and spent some time looking at (and photographing) yellow warblers on the black rocks, Sally lightfoot crabs, and flightless cormorants. After half an hour or so we turned back to the beach and began to follow the loop trail inland. We saw a couple of smallish tortoises followed by a male land iguana, a Galapagos mockingbird and a medium ground finch. Further

along the trail were more land iguanas, one lying right across the path, and then another excellent (and easy to photograph) tortoise. The tortoises here are the Alcedo giant tortoises – another new species for the trip - and are endemic to this part of Isabela Island. Photographers and non-photographers alike enjoyed these exceptional encounters with almost pre-historic animals.



The end of the loop trail, and our return to the beach was a signal for some to swim in the cooling water.

Back on board there was little time before we upped anchor, and the captain was heading north through the Bolivar Channel to Targus Cove. Due to the upwelling currents this is an excellent place to see cetaceans so most of the group were out on deck spotting. Our captain, Jose, was very happy to travel at half speed through the Bolivar Channel. We saw a couple of Galapagos petrels and large numbers of

Galapagos shearwaters, and in the distance had a brief glimpse of the back of some cetaceans, but they had disappeared by the time we got closer. Mark's suggestion was that they were most likely to have been a species of beaked whale.

We continued to scan as we continued our journey north, and as we began turning into Targus Cove, Matt spotted some dolphins in the distance. After a quick word with our captain we had changed course and were heading in their direction. Whilst the dolphins weren't keen on playing near the boat we did get some great views of them – the first cetaceans of the trip... common bottlenose dolphins.

Once anchored up in Targus Cove we had some time to relax before jumping into the pangas to head over to our landing site. This is a historic site rather than a wildlife site as Charles Darwin is known to have landed here in 1835. As we walked up the steps towards the viewpoint there were the names of ships and the year they arrived etched into the rocks – historic graffiti!

As we climbed higher we had a good view of a rather skittish land iguana. We continued to the highest point

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on the trail and looked out to the north at Volcan Ecuador, and also Darwin, and to the south Cerro Azul, and across the narrow stretch of water we could see Fernandina where we are planning to land tomorrow. It was a nice walk (if a little hot!), but before too long we were back down to sea level and into the pangas heading back to Beluga.



Following a short break for a cold drink and a snack we were out in the pangas again. This time we headed out of Targus Cove and around the peninsula in a northerly direction along the cliff face. We had some spectacular, and close, views of brown noddy, nesting pelicans and some penguin mum and youngster 'couples, and we had a Galapagos hawk cruising overhead at one point. It was a wonderful final activity of the day. Beluga had hauled anchor to come and meet us just as the sun was setting. What a way to end the day!

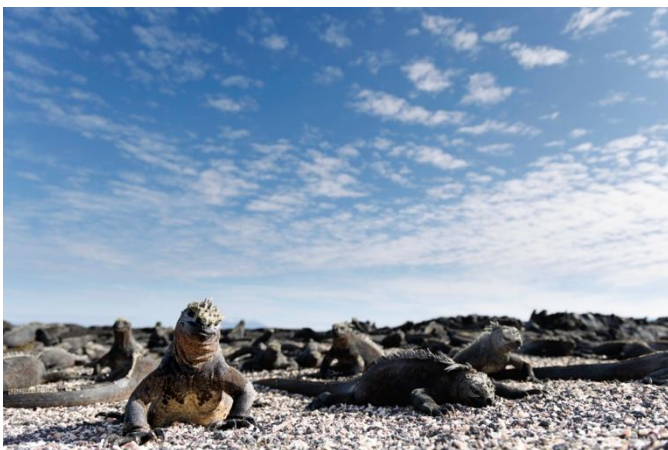
After dinner Mark gave part two of his Darwin presentation and before the evening ended, we showed a 4-minute clip from Planet Earth 2 of the racer snakes at Punta Espinoza attacking marine iguanas.

Tomorrow will be a busy day!

Day 12:

Punta Espinoza, Fernandina & Punta Vincente Roca, Isabela

Monday 4 August 2025



Even though all of the visitor sites on our trip are amazing, Punta Espinoza on Fernandina is somehow even more incredible than all of the others. This is where the BBC filmed the racer snakes attacking young marine iguanas – perhaps the most amazing piece of wildlife film ever made – and landing here feels as if you are landing on a film set. We arrived at our landing site just after 7am and it was high tide so we walked through a short stretch of mangroves before arriving on the sand-covered rocks. However, there were hundreds of marine iguanas in the immediate area, and all facing the same direction, worshipping the sun to

heat up their (naturally) cold bodies. They are the most fascinating animals huddling together and climbing over one another – there is no concept of 'personal space'.

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It was fascinating to watch as a small ground finch was working its way through the group of iguanas pecking bits of skin off them and then moving on. A mockingbird seemed to find them and their surroundings a eorthy source of food too and was jumping from one iguana to the next, generally landing on their heads and looking around before jumping onto the next one.



We sat and watched them, photographed them and admired them until Juan told us we had to move on and that we had already been in this one spot for an hour.

We had seen a pair of Galapagos hawks in the trees as we approached the landing site, and they took off and flew over us and the iguanas every now and then. We moved on again to another gigantic pile of marine iguanas, and then on again to a couple of sea lion pups that were playing beautifully on the volcanic rocks by the water's edge. At the furthest point in the short walking trail at the landing site, there was a flightless cormorant drying its wings and posing in the sun.



More marine iguanas, Sally lightfoot crabs and of course sea lions appeared before it was time (after our 3-hour landing) to return to Beluga.

We had about 30 minutes before we were off again for what was the very best snorkelling trip so far. The water at our snorkelling site was fairly cool, but was quite simply full of life. Feeding turtles, colourful fish and... marine iguanas feeding on the sea grass – one of the most extraordinary feeding habits in the natural world. Marine iguanas were the absolute stars of the show. They occur nowhere else on earth and to see them feeding on algae underwater as if it were on land is a most extraordinary (and utterly wonderful) experience.

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Our snorkel trip came to an end too soon and we were back aboard Beluga for lunch, and almost immediately headed further north to Punta Vincente Roca where we anchored down, got ready for our final panga excursion of the day. This time we went on a panga ride along the nearby cliff wall - brown noddies, blue-footed boobies, the occasional sea lions and scores of turtles.

We were back onboard Beluga by 4pm and within the hour we were on the bridge with Juan and the captain who was slowing Beluga down as we were about to cross the equator heading north. As we hit 0.00.00 we had a cocktail to celebrate and Juan immediately burst into song and played the guitar – this is one of the moments that we will all remember!

Dinner was followed by the second presentation of images taken by the group and reminiscing about the voyage and some of the amazing sights we have had. And then it was time for bed after our penultimate, and (very) full, day.



Day 13:
Puerto Egas, Santiago & Bartolome

Tuesday 5 August 2025

Today was our final full day and we were determined to make it a good one! We were up at 6am for breakfast and off Beluga at 7am in order to land on the black sandy beach at Puerto Egas. Another group had landed shortly before us, so instead of following them along the trail, we walked along the beach for an hour photographing oystercatchers, crabs, pelicans and the unusual scenery of this particular site.



We then headed inland and along the coast – there was a huge amount to see, including a large land iguana that was in the grassy scrub between us and the ocean. Continuing on we came out to the volcanic ‘platform’ and walked along to the various crystal-clear water pools. There were a few Galapagos fur seals resting on the rocks and some sea lions that wanted to join them – the fur seals weren’t happy about it and chased them off as soon as they tried to climb out. One of the sea lions became very frustrated about it all and was leaping out of the water and splashing back down making as much noise and causing as much disturbance as possible.

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Looking beyond the fur seals there were blue-footed boobies diving into the water at high speed, catching fish, as well as pelicans and brown noddies. One of the group even managed to spot a black-tipped reef shark patrolling the inshore waters.

As we returned to the beach we had an excellent encounter with a large and colourful land iguana, and then some of the group saw a female lava lizard stalk, kill and eat a painted locust.



Over lunch the captain moved the ship and anchored off Bartolome Island.

It was slightly overcast when we took off from Beluga for our final snorkel of the trip, but the sea was far warmer than we had expected. Swimming with the island on our right-hand side we snorkelled towards the iconic Pinnacle Rock. The conditions here were very different from any other snorkel we've done on the trip – the seabed was sandy for a start and the sea itself was fairly clear.



It was a few minutes before we saw anything of note (other than the customarily colourful fish!) but it was a small group of penguins (four in all) that caught our attention. They were sat on a rock, enjoying watching the world go by. One of them got into the water and swam towards us, and put its head down... 'snorkelling', looking for food. It was completely oblivious to us.

Our last visit of the day was a dry landing on Bartolome itself and a walk up the 360 steps to the top of the island to see the most famous view of the Galapagos and Pinnacle Rock

below. The sun was beginning to go down and it was incredible to see many of the islands that we had been travelling around.

Back on board Beluga we had to pack for our departure tomorrow, but managed a drink on the sundeck and before dinner the captain and crew said their farewell and we toasted them for being exceptional on our voyage of discovery.

Day 14:

North Seymour, Baltra & on to Guayaquil

Wednesday 6 August 2025

Although it was our last day and the landing was only going to be a short one, everyone wanted to be up in time to spend an hour and a half on North Seymour departing at 6am. At our landing site we were greeted by a pair of nesting swallow-tailed gulls and in the sky there was a swirling mass of both great and magnificent frigatebirds, and blue-footed boobies.

Once we got onto the trail we immediately saw a male magnificent frigatebird with its bright red pouch – a first for us on the trip, and a pair of blue-footed boobies doing their fabulous courtship dance. Although it was an early start, at the beginning of a very long travel day for everyone, we all agreed that it was a fabulous excursion to end on.

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We were back on Beluga for breakfast at 7.30am and then after gathering our belongings we said our final goodbyes to the captain and crew and departed on the pangas at about 8.30am. There was a bus waiting to take us to the airport on arrival at the jetty on Baltra. It was a short (10-minute) transfer to the airport. We dropped our bags off, said goodbye to Juan, went through security and browsed the shops before walking out to the first of today's aircraft.



We took off for Guayaquil and

watched the Galapagos disappear into the background as we gained height and headed to mainland Ecuador for our homeward flights.

The Galapagos Islands are a truly remarkable place, with outstanding wildlife, and everyone agreed that it had been a wonderful trip.

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Checklist for Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine



	Common name	Scientific name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14
	BIRDS														
1	Galápagos penguin	<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Waved albatross	<i>Phoebastria exulans</i>		✓											
3	Galápagos petrel	<i>Pterodroma phaeopygia</i>										✓	✓	✓	
4	Galápagos shearwater	<i>Puffinus subalaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Elliot's storm petrel (white-vented)	<i>Oceanites gracilis (galapagoensis)</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Wedge-rumped storm petrel	<i>Hydrobates tethys</i>				✓	✓								
7	Red-billed tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>		✓			✓								
8	Flightless cormorant	<i>Nannopterum harrisi</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Great frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>					✓								✓
12	Red-footed booby	<i>Sula sula</i>					✓								
13	Nazca booby	<i>Sula granti</i>		✓			✓						✓	✓	
14	Blue-footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	White-cheeked pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓					
16	American (Galapagos) flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber (glyphorynchus)</i>			✓				✓	✓	✓				
17	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>				✓					✓				
18	Cattle egret	<i>Bulbulcus ibis</i>			✓			✓		✓					
19	Lava heron	<i>Butorides sundevalli</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	

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20	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	✓				✓	✓						
21	Galápagos hawk	<i>Buteo galapagoensis</i>		✓				✓	✓			✓		✓
22	Common gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>						✓		✓				
23	Hudsonian whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>				✓	✓							✓
24	Wandering tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanum</i>					✓							✓
25	Black-necked stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>			✓	✓								
26	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓				✓
27	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓		✓							✓
28	Semi-palmated plover	<i>Chadrius semipalmatus</i>			✓		✓			✓				✓
29	Least sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>												✓
30	Galapagos (American) oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus (palliatus) galapagensis</i>							✓	✓				✓
31	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				✓				✓				
32	Lava gull	<i>Larus fuliginosus</i>					✓			✓				
33	Swallow-tailed gull	<i>Larus furcatus</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓				✓
34	Brown noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Galápagos dove	<i>Zenaida galapagoensis</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓					✓
36	Dark-billed cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus melacoryphus</i>					✓					✓		
37	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>			✓	✓						✓		✓
38	Galápagos short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus galapagoensis</i>						✓						
39	Vermillion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>								✓				
40	Galápagos flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus magnirostris</i>				✓								
41	Galápagos mockingbird	<i>Mimus (parvulus) parvulus</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
42	Espanola mockingbird	<i>Mimus macdonaldi</i>		✓										
43	San Cristobal mockingbird	<i>Nesomimus melanotis</i>	✓											
44	Yellow warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
45	Large ground finch	<i>Geospiza magnirostris</i>						✓	✓	✓				
46	Medium ground finch	<i>Geospiza fortis</i>			✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓

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47	Small ground finch	<i>Geospiza fuliginosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Sharp-beaked ground finch	<i>Geospiza difficilis</i>	✓				✓								
49	Common cactus finch	<i>Geospiza scandens</i>						✓	✓						
50	Espanola ground finch	<i>Geospiza conirostris</i>		✓											
51	Genovesa cactus finch	<i>Geospiza propinqua</i>					✓								
52	Small tree finch	<i>Camarhynchus parvulus</i>						✓		✓					
53	Grey warbler finch	<i>Certhidia fuscus</i>	✓	✓											
54	Green warbler finch	<i>Certhidia olivacea</i>						✓		✓					
	MAMMALS														
1	Galápagos sea lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Galápagos fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus galapagoensis</i>												✓	
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS														
1	Santa Cruz giant tortoise	<i>Chelonoidis porteri</i>						✓							
2	Alcedo giant tortoise	<i>Chelonoidis vandenburghi</i>										✓			
3	Green sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	
4	Marine iguana	<i>Amblyrhynchus cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Galapagos land iguana	<i>Conolophus subcristatus</i>				✓						✓			
6	Galapagos (Isabela) lava lizard	<i>Microlophus albermarlensis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	San Cristobal lava lizard	<i>Microlophus bivittatus</i>	✓												
8	Espanola lava lizard	<i>Microlophus delanonis</i>		✓											
9	Floreana lava lizard	<i>Microlophus grayii</i>			✓										
10	Santiago lava lizard	<i>Microlophus jacobi</i>				✓									

Find out more about our [Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine](#) trip or [contact us](#)

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