

Galápagos Islands Photo Safari and Hummingbird Extension 27 July- 7 August 2012 by Wildside intern Sarah Winnicki

Friday, 27 July 2012: (Very) Late arrivals into Quito, Ecuador.

Saturday, 28 July 2012:

After breakfast we got on our tour bus and drove to see Bernard de Legarda's Winged Virgin statue and Quito's Old City. Following some shopping and a taste of 'guanabana y mora' sorbet we toured La Compania Church and Independence Square before setting off for Mitad del Mundo. We learned about the history behind this traditional French location of the Equator before we departed for lunch at the beautiful Restaurante El Crater.

Variable Hawks, Blue-and-white Swallows and Llamas accompanied our stunning view of the dormant volcano while we enjoyed our meal. Following lunch we drove past roasting Guinea Pigs to the Inta Nan Solar Museum, where we got a taste of native rituals (including the secret art of crafting shrunken heads) and the myths surrounding equatorial physics.

The gardens at the museum allowed for some photo opportunities of flowers, Sparkling Violetears and Southern Yellow Grosbeaks. After a drive back into Quito we enjoyed the buffet at the hotel's restaurant and a briefing for the next day's events.

Sunday, 29 July 2012:

We left the hotel early for a flight out of Quito to the Galápagos through Guayaquil. After we landed in San Cristóbal and got to our boat, we had lunch on our luxury yacht *Xavier III* before taking a bus into the highlands of San Cristobal. We stopped to view the Galápagos Miconia before continuing to La Galapaguera to view the San Cristóbal Giant Tortoises.

At the Galapaguera we were treated to views of the tortoises as well as photo opportunities of Yellow Warblers, Chatham (San Cristóbal) Mockingbirds, Galápagos Flycatchers, San Cristóbal Cutleaf Daisies and four of the "Darwin's Finches": the Medium Ground-finch, the Small Ground-finch, the Warbler Finch and the Woodpecker Finch.

The Mockingbirds were also an attraction at our next stop, the Colorado Hill Lookout, which also afforded an amazing view of the island. When we got back to the boat we got a taste of the day to come with sightings of Magnificent Frigatebirds, Blue-footed Boobies, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Elliot's Storm-Petrels, and sea lions. After a cocktail toast and dinner we went to bed while our boat carried us to North Seymour Island.

Monday, 30 July 2012:

After breakfast we headed off via dinghy to North Seymour Island. Before we even made it to the shore we were granted sightings of Blue-footed Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Noddies, Lava Herons, Swallow-tailed Gulls and sea lions. Once we had climbed up onto the rocky shore we saw Galápagos Doves, pairs of boobies, nests of frigatebirds and roosting gulls. An hour and a half on the trail, a very slow pace, brought us to nests and young of both species of (displaying) frigatebirds and Blue-footed Boobies as well as close looks at cacti, Land Iguanas, Marine Iguanas, sea lions and American Oystercatchers.

When we returned to the boat a small portion of the group went snorkeling along the island, where they viewed rays, parrotfish, hawkfish, garden eels and other reef species. After lunch Kevin gave a photography lesson to those interested and then we all set off on a dinghy trip to Mosquera Beach. Unfortunately, the water levels were not conducive to landing, but we all got good views of sea lions, Brown Pelicans and Audubon's Shearwaters. After dinner that evening the boat moved us to Sullivan Bay.

Tuesday, 31 July 2012:

Before breakfast we took a dinghy trip around Bartolomé to get good views of Galápagos Penguins, Lava Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Blue-footed Boobies and, of course, sea lions. One sea lion was even inquisitive enough to jump into our dinghy on this trip! When we all had tested our camera work on the bouncy dinghy we went back to eat breakfast before heading off to explore the lava fields on Santiago.

On Santiago we learned about the region's volcanic origins and continuing activity while we climbed over the beautiful "pahoehoe" lava formations. Along the way we came across Large Painted Locusts, Lava Cacti and a Candelabra Cactus.

After we made it back to the boat a portion of the group went snorkeling along Bartolomé with Galápagos Penguins, sea lions, White-tipped Reef Sharks and various reef fish.

A second snorkel was offered after lunch and featured penguins, sharks, various reef fish and an interesting perspective on Pinnacle Rock. The afternoon hike was a trip up 355 steps to the Pinnacle Rock overlook on Bartolomé.

Highlights include spectacular (if windy) viewing areas, Grey Mat Plant, volcanic formations, and lava lizards. That evening we had a goodbye toast to the other boat residents (they were replaced the next day) and made our way to Santa Cruz.

Wednesday, 1 August 2012:

A Green Turtle greeted us for breakfast this morning before we took the dinghies to Santa Cruz and the Charles Darwin Research Station. We learned about the issues the islands are constantly facing with invasive species before getting to view the Darwin Station's Giant Tortoises. We watched the various species of tortoises and iguanas while learning about the breeding programs at the Station.

We viewed the enclosure of the recently deceased Lonesome George [see our post from]

and met Diego the tortoise as well as inquisitive Galápagos Mockingbirds and busy Common Cactus-Finches.

After leaving the Center we went into Puerto Ayora for shopping and lunch, which was unfortunately more of a hassle than we anticipated due to kitchen problems and a wasted hour in the first restaurant we tried.

After we finally got food we caught a bus to the highlands of Santa Cruz where the Giant Tortoises roam free in the ranch lands. We caught views of Smooth-billed Anis, White-cheeked Pintails and Common Gallinules, but the main attraction was the seemingly-prehistoric, domed tortoises along the muddy trails.

Before we made it back to the boat we walked a few hundred yards into a massive lava tunnel.

That evening we made our way to Rabida.

Thursday, 2 August 2012:

After breakfast we had our first wet landing on Rabida's red sand beach. Our group viewed Caribbean Flamingos in the saline pools and climbed to a couple spectacular viewing areas.

Highlights of our hike included Galápagos Hawk, Lava Lizards, Prickly Pear Cacti with soft spines, diving Boobies and a Wandering Tattler.

The morning snorkel took place off of Rabida and included great viewing opportunities for sea lions, reef fish, sharks, sea turtles and roosting seabirds.

After lunch we landed on Bachas Beach, where we viewed Ghost Crabs, boobies, pelicans and what is left of the birch tree that gave the beach its name. The saline pool had flamingos, Semipalmated Plovers, Black-necked Stilts, White-cheeked Pintails, Ruddy Turnstones, Wandering Tattlers and a Whimbrel. A Least Sandpiper was spotted in a second pool.

The boat moved to Floreana during the day, allowing Captain Victor to spot a Humpback Whale off of the boat (and allowing us to sleep better that night).

Friday, 3 August 2012:

Our explorations on the beach on Floreana brought us sightings of sea lions, "sky-pointing" Blue-footed Boobies, and an interesting array of underwater creatures that had washed ashore. The saline pond contained flamingos and stilts, but we had no luck finding stingrays in the Sting Ray Cove. We passed Devil's Crown on our way to Champion Rock, where we opted to take a dinghy to catch a glimpse of the rare Charles Mockingbird. Not only did we hear and see the mockingbird, but we also got to watch Audubon's Shearwaters, playful sea lions, and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Midway through the day we journeyed around the island, which allowed us to spot a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins. After lunch we visited the "Post Office" to deposit our post cards and search through the barrel to find cards to deliver when we get home. While the crew played

futbol a portion of our group snorkeled with the Green (Galápagos Black) Sea Turtle off of the beach. After dinner we traveled to Española Island.

Saturday, 4 August 2012:

In the morning we were off for Española Island, where our hike brought us in contact with Blue-footed Boobies, nesting Nazca Boobies, Waved Albatrosses at their "airport", thirsty Hood Mockingbirds, Galápagos Hawks, Large Cactus-Finches, Marine Iguanas, sea lions, and the "blow holes" along the 300 foot cliff. Our trip back to the boat was extended because the sea was rough, but that did not stop us from taking a dinghy ride to the beach after lunch in order to see the sea lions and the family feuds between the Hood Mockingbirds. The highlight of this portion of the trip was the appearance of four Galápagos Hawks eating a young sea lion. That afternoon we crossed open seas on our way to San Cristóbal, which meant that some of the group got glimpses of flying Waved Albatrosses, Audubon's Shearwaters, Band-rumped and Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrels, and the rare Galápagos Petrel! The crew threw a goodbye toast while the other people on board "serenaded" us with a bit of their own karaoke.

Sunday, 5 August 2012:

After breakfast and luggage packing we said goodbye to the crew and left for San Cristóbal island, where we visited the Interpretation Center for a last bit of island history. We left the islands via the airport and arrived in Quito after a layover in Guayaquil. Once in Quito, we spent a bit of time at the market before eating dinner in the Hilton Colón restaurant and briefing for the next day's events.

Monday, 6 August 2012:

Following breakfast in the hotel we loaded into a bus for the trip to the Guango Lodge a few hours north of Quito. Along the way we had amazing views of the volcano Cotopaxi, which had been hidden by clouds when we had been in the city previously. A stop for Giant Hummingbirds brought us sightings of Andean Condors and Carunculated Caracaras (but no hummingbird) and we got to enjoy a view of the volcano Antisana from the 13,000 foot Papallecta pass. With our guide, Edison Buenaño, we toured the cloud forest behind the lodge, seeing amazing birds that included the Turquoise Jay, the Masked Trogon, the Grey-hooded Bush-Tanager, the Streaked Tuftedcheek, and many others. We ate lunch at the lodge in-between viewing sessions at the dozens of hummingbird feeders that attracted nine different hummingbird species. After a few hours of hummingbird watching and photography we drove back into Quito, had dinner at the Hilton Colón, and made sure that our bags were packed for departure the following morning.

Tuesday, 7 August 2012: Early morning departure from Quito.