



# Galapagos Trip Report

## October 7-17, 2005

By Adrian Binns

### Day 1 / October 7 – Fly into Quito

After an airport sprint in Miami, reminiscent of a certain infamous person, by 4 of us, we managed to make it onto the plane just in time. The plane ride was rather uneventful and we were overjoyed to find that our bags had also made it. By 8:15pm we were checked into the hotel and ventured upstairs to the dining room for dinner.

### Day 2 / October 8 – Papallacta Pass

We awoke to a dawn chorus of Great Thrushes and Rufous-collared Sparrows, who along with Eared Doves were certainly the most numerous species seen today. At breakfast the whole group was together for the first time and following introductions we headed east to the Papallacta Pass, first stopping to walk a dirt road at about 3000 meters elevation, the same level as Quito which could be seen at one end of the valley. It was rather windy and most of the birds were hunkered down so we only got brief views of Tufted Tit-Tyrants, Glossy Flowerpiercer, Black Flowerpiercer, 4 Ash-breasted Sierra Finchs, Azara's Spinetail, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Plain-collared Seedeater and a flyover Hooded Siskin. Flying over the high ridges were a number of Carunculated Caracara's, some of which flew over our heads giving us good views of both adults and juveniles.

From here we headed further up the mountain and into wonderful valleys with grasses, forbs and low shrubs. At the pass, which is at 4000 meters, a Plumbeous Sierra Finch was sitting beside the road and a Short-eared South American Rabbit ran down the track before us heading into the grasses. The various stops on the way up enabled us to get acclimatized to the high elevation. We slowly walked a short distance and picked up a Stout-billed Cinclodes bringing food to its nest (a hole in the bank) and a female Ecuadorian Hillstar which was nesting under an overhang besides the Cinclodes. The mist and clouds at this elevation were moving in and out making it tough at times to see any distance, but when it cleared it allowed us to locate Brown-backed Chat-tyrant, Many-striped Canestero, Bar-winged Cinclodes, and get great views of an Andean Tit Spinetail with nesting material in its beak. The final leg of the journey to the cloud enshrouded top was by bus where we were going to look for Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. A Tawny Antpitta walked across the track and down a slope while a Paramo Ground-Tyrant was busy searching for food. Paulo, our Ecuadorian guide, located the Seedsnipe only a short distance further up the mountain. Most of the group made the climb and where not only rewarded with close views at this beautifully patterned grouse sized bird, but witnessed the clouds clear and expose stunning scenery dotted with small bodies of water. Heading back down the mountain we had good looks at Bar-winged Cinclodes and had our first views of what

would be many Brown-bellied Swallows. We had exceptional looks at a Variable Hawk flying across the valley carrying prey to its nest on a cliff and awaiting chicks.

Several stops at high elevation lakes produced Andean Ruddy-Duck, Andean Coot, Yellow-bellied Pintail and Silvery Grebe. Though these were rather distant views the scenery was magical. Papallacta Lake had an Andean Gull along with Spotted Sandpiper and better views of the pintail and teal. The surrounding vegetation produced a Green-tailed Trainbearer, Black Flowerpiercer, Cinerous Conebill and exceptional views of Shining Sunbeam. This was to be a good omen for what was to come.

Our final stop of the day was at Guango Lodge where a handful of hummingbird feeders in the small but beautiful gardens produced an astonishing amount of activity and 14 species of hummingbird. Everywhere one turned there was a new hummer. New names were flying out of Glenn's, Kevin's and Paulo's mouths.....Long-tailed Sylth, Chestnut-banded Coronet, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Collared Inca and the outrageous Swordbill Hummingbirds were amongst the larger ones. Smaller sized ones included Speckled Hummingbird, Gorgeted Woodstar and White-bellied Woodstar, while Green Violetear, a female Mountain Velvetbreast, Tyrian Metallait, Glowing Puffleg and Tourmaline Sunangel rounded out an exceptional hour of activity – this amount of activity should just not be allowed! The gorgeous Masked Flowerpiercer along with a heard only Tropical Parula were the only passerines in the garden.

### **Day 3 / October 9 – Fly Quito to San Cristobal; Isla Lobos**

A brief check of the hotel gardens as the bags were being loaded yielded Green Trainbearer and Sparkling Violetear. The remainder of the morning was spent traveling from Quito to San Cristobal with a 45 minute stop over in Quayaquil, where Black-necked Stilt and Great Egret were added to the list.

We arrived at 11:30am and where through all the necessary procedures within half an hour. Our first sighting produced the daunting task of separating Small from Medium Ground Finch. Actually all the finches we saw were black (male) or brown (female), the latter at least having some variation depending upon species. The small dots on the breast made it a little easier to identify the female Small Tree Finch from the streaked female Small Ground Finch. However, it is the bills that really help separate them, though having said that there is considerable variation in the size and shape of Medium Ground Finch's.

After dropping our bags off at the dock so they could be taken out to our boat, the *Guantanamera*, we walked the harbor road into a residential neighborhood coming across Galapagos Blue and Galapagos Sulphur butterflies, San Cristobal Lava Lizards, the first of many Yellow Warblers, the only warbler species on the islands and several Smooth-billed Ani's. As most islands have specific species associated with them, our target for San Cristobal was none other the San Cristobal Mockingbird also known as Chatham Mockingbird, after the British name for the island. A pair was located near the interpretive center, one whom was singing, not surprisingly sounding similar to our mockingbird (once a mockingbird always a mockingbird). At one point it coughed up what looked like an insect. Magnificent Frigatebirds graced the skies and the occasional Blue-footed Booby would fly over the harbor where numerous boats had dropped anchor. Along the rocky lava strewn coast we watched 2 Wandering Tattlers fly in, as well as Galapagos Marine Iguanas, Sally Lightfoot Crabs and a Galapagos Sea Lion and her pup.

By 1:30pm we had taken our very short panga (zodiac) ride to the boat and were having lunch while sailing along the south west coast of San Cristobal to Isla Lobos. Roberto is our National Park assigned naturalist guide and following his animated briefing on the upper deck we took the panga several hundred yards to the island where Galapagos Marine Iguanas and Sea Lions

greeted us. Walking over the black basaltic lava rocks that covered our path and though a stunted Palo Santo and Galapagos Cotton forest where both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds had juveniles on nests and Marine Iguanas at our feet emitted salt through their noses. A Lava Heron stalked crabs and fish as waves crashed over the lava boulders and we continued to check each finch and again had a Yellow Warbler or 2 flitting about the mangroves. Ruddy Turnstones were loafing on the white sand besides a large Galapagos Sea Lion colony which was dominated by a beachmaster (large black male) who was in control of his harem. After a good hour on the small island we boarded the pangas and worked our way around the coastline where a pair of Lava Gulls, aptly named because of their color, obliged by alighting on a rock. We came across a Green Turtle and spotted a massive flock of Galapagos Shearwaters, a recent split from Audubon's Shearwater, with a few Brown Noddies in a feeding frenzy. We were able to get into the flock and watch all the activity in astonishment. Working our way back to the boat, a Great Blue Heron with reddish legs (breeding plumage or sub-species), was seen besides the water and Blue-footed Boobies dotted the coastline rocks.

Back aboard, we headed back towards the harbor where we had half a dozen Dark-rumped Petrels feeding ahead of another shearwater flock and in the harbor all three storm-petrels, the most numerous being Elliot's (White-vented) followed by Galapagos (Wedged-rumped) and a single close look at a Band-rumped (Madeiran). What a start and introduction to these magical islands.

#### **Day 4 / October 10 – Espanola - Gardner Bay and Punta Suarez**

Anchored in Gardner Bay off the north coast of Espanola, a school of Bullseye Pufferfish at the stern of the boat greeted us at first light, and in the distance we could make out Nazca Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds flying around Isla Gardner. After breakfast Glenn, Cheri, Barbara, Jane and Roberto got their wetsuits fitted and we all boarded the pangas to journey out to Isla Gardner. Dropping the snorkelers off we skirted the steep coastline. A pair of American Oystercatchers and a Whimbrel were hanging out on an outcropping of flatter rocks along with the ubiquitous Sally Lightfoot Crabs. A lone Wandering Tattler teased us as we tried to get close, only to have it hide behind rocks and take off as soon as we located it. This went on for several hundred yards before the tattler won that game. Our first Hood Mockingbird of the day was seen exceptionally well when one was perched a few feet above the water level and within meters of us. Even closer, almost eyeball to eyeball, was a Lava Heron that negotiated the steep rock face with the skill of a tightrope walker. The rear end of a Swallow-tailed Gull could be seen in a small cove, its nest site, and when we stood in the boat we could see that it had a chick. A short distance further along the coastline, we entered a cave and here found another Swallow-tail lower down and in better view. Five Galapagos Shearwaters could be seen flying circuits around a cove and three Swallow-tails landed on the water which allowed us to approach to a short distance.

After picking up the snorkelers and hearing about the colorful Yellow-tailed Surgeonfish, Panamic Sergeant Majors and Parrotfish they saw along with rays, we briefly boarded the boat before going to the sandy beach on Espanola. Here we spent an hour wandering about the beach with Hood Mockingbirds (named after the British name for the island) at our feet, which were very happy to have us slap the flies that landed on us and feed them to them! Galapagos Sea Lions were strewn all over the beach, some very vocal and others fast asleep with the occasional flipper swipe at a fly. Warbler Finch was the first finch seen well as it worked its way through the shrubbery on the edge of the beach and this was followed by a male Large Cactus Finch, both of which were easy to identify based on size and bill structure. A Galapagos Hawk and distant Galapagos Dove were also added to the list.

After lunch we sailed around to the southwestern tip of Espanola at Punta Suarez and spent a marvelous 3 hours walking the short rocky boulder lined path around the tip. Yes it took this long

because it was that good. Everywhere one turned there was activity and action, a Galapagos Hawk greeting us as we disembarked; Espanola Lava Lizards; Espanola Marine Iguanas, larger than the ones we saw yesterday and with a deep reddish wash on their backs; a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and another Wandering Tattler; sea lions; more Hooded Mockingbirds, Yellow Warblers and Small Ground Finches, but it was the 'white birds' that dominated the afternoon. Red-tailed Tropicbirds effortlessly and gracefully flew sorties along the coast, some putting on the brakes with their bodies tilted at a 45 degree angle and using their long streamer tail to balance themselves as they came into land near their nests. Nazca Boobies were still on their nests, many of which were besides the path, and we even saw a short display followed by an even shorter mating. They were very vocal with numerous gruntings (the females) and whistles (males) being heard. The Blue-footed Boobies on the other hand appeared to have finished nesting and only a few were seen. As we reached the cliff and descended to a lower elevation we came across a Swallow-tailed Gull roost and soon had good numbers of them flying out to sea whenever a Galapagos Hawk appeared. The views we had as they kited above us as they actively hunted were outstanding.

Here on the southwestern corner at the end of the trail was a blowhole. When water rushed under the bedrock, spray would spout into the air, but due to low tide the blow hole did not produce the 100 foot high spray, but never the less was impressive especially when graced with Waved Albatrosses gliding past. Heading around the path back towards our boat we came across a pair of albatrosses displaying in the middle of the path. Only feet from us we watched in awe as they "glucked" their bills and began to duel with their bills, stop, lift their heads up sky-pointing and drop it in a split-second and begin again. Occasionally they would open their bills wide instead of sky-pointing. The show went on and on, and though they had pretty much completed nesting this was part of their pair bonding and we had to keep moving, unfortunately leaving the show.

### **Day 5 / October 11 – Santa Cruz**

Following a quiet night anchored in Puerto Ayora harbor we awoke to the full effect of the garua (foggy and misty conditions at this time of year that usually cover the tops of the islands) which only got worse as the day went on.

After breakfast we took a 40 minute bus ride from the harbor to the highlands of Santa Cruz and an elevation of about 850 meters where we walked along the rim of the two calderas, Cerro Mora and Gemelos, and through the very pretty *Scalesia* forest which was enhanced with ferns and dangling mosses and epiphytes - we were now in the humid tropical zone. There were numerous Small Ground Finches about and having Small Tree Finch and Large Tree Finch side by side made for a great comparison. Two Galapagos Doves, with their exquisitely patterned plumage posed on a rail for pictures. A Woodpecker Finch with its undulating flight was seen flying away and unfortunately that was our best look of the day. A Galapagos Flycatcher was very cooperative, following along besides us on the trail and at times perching very close to our heads, and a couple of Warbler Finches were seen well. From here we headed back down the road to a Tortoise Farm where free roaming Santa Cruz Giant Tortoises cross the National Park boundary and share the pastures with Cattle Egrets and Common Moorhens. The tortoises are not only huge but they live to be over 140 years old and don't reach maturity until they approach 70! Needless to say we did see a pair of 'youngsters' mating. All three Ground Finches could be seen feeding on the paths while Yellow Warblers were common flitting about the trees.

On the way out Sherry spotted a Dark-billed Cuckoo flying low over a field and it was soon located, perched on a stalk only a foot above the ground. This is a very smart looking bird with wonderful contrasting colors of grey on the head and a buffy belly – certainly the smartest of the new world cuckoos. It is a recent arrival to the islands (from South America) and considered rare.

Our last morning stop was at a lava tube cave. These form as the upper surface of a lava flow cools and the inner flow continues to rush downhill. When no more lava comes out of the crater, there is often a narrow 'empty tunnel' left behind. Bob, Cheri, Barbara and Roberto opted to take it the whole way through, about 1/2 a mile in length, including negotiating a narrow 3 foot passage. The rest of us took the bus around to the exit and as they exited watched a Vegetarian Finch (our only one of the trip) feeding on top of a tree.

It was back on the pangas to the boat for lunch before returning to Puerto Ayora, the commercial and tourist capital of the Galapagos, to visit the Charles Darwin Research Center and all the various subspecies of Giant Tortoises that are in their breeding program. It also gave us a chance to look for the Common Cactus Finch as their preferred food is the *Opuntia* cactus of which numerous plants could be found here. It took us until the end of our walk to locate a female and then as we looked in the gift shop and had ice cream next door a mixed flock of inquisitive finches landed next to the path which included an all black male. Most of us opted to walk into town from here in spite of the gentle mist, and visit the multitude of shops that mainly offered "I love boobies" T-shirts for sale.

### **Day 6 / October 12 - Floreana**

We set sail in the early hours of the morning and reached Enderby, a small conical shape island just off Floreana at daybreak. The call to look for Charles's Mockingbird was sent out to everyone and soon we were all on the upper deck diligently searching the vegetation and rocks for the rarest of the Galapagos mockers, there are only an estimated 150 left. The occasional Red-billed Tropicbird as well as Great and Magnificent Frigatebird were more common. After circling the island once with no luck we moved onto Champion, an island between Enderby and Floreana. Here Barbara found two Charles Mockingbirds, amongst the rocks near a sandy beach which had 5 sea lions resting on it. Though the distance from the boat was about 100 yards we could make out that they were darker than the Galapagos Mockingbirds that we saw the day before. A great start to the day. Following breakfast, during which we had two Galapagos Penguins swim close to the boat, we took the panga's to Punta Cormorant, which just happens to have no cormorants, and walked through the 'ghost forest' which is the local name for the leafless (at this time of year) Palo Santo trees, to scan the lagoon for White-cheeked Pintails, waders and shorebirds.

It certainly is surreal to be on the equator watching a penguin swimming in front of you while Greater Flamingos fly overhead. The lagoon held several dozen flamingos, most of which were sleeping; Black-necked Stilts; four Wilson's Phalaropes spinning in circles to bring up a meal; a Semipalmated Plover and three Least Sandpiper. Finches were few and far between other than a couple of Small and Medium Ground Finches and we got great enjoyment from a very cooperative Yellow Warbler that kept looking for insects at Erica's feet. We also shared the narrow green sand beach with a small group of Galapagos Sea Lions that included a young beachmaster who really was more interested in catching up on his sleep than keeping us away.

The color of the beach was due to large amounts of green olivine crystals from volcanic tuffs present in the shallow sea water. It was back to the boat to suit up for snorkeling, which this time included all but four of us. They headed to Devil's Crown, a marine site several hundred meters off shore, where the snorkeling was superb and came back with tails of White-tipped Sharks, Golden Crown-nosed Rays, Spotted Eagle rays, Yellow-bellied Surgeonfish, Mexican Hognose, Parrotfish, Chocolate-chip Sea Stars and Pencil Sea Urchins, while the birders floated amongst a small group of Galapagos Shearwaters and watched in amazement as a Sea Lion half heartedly chased a Galapagos Penguin.

After we re-boarded the boat we sailed a short distance to Post Office Bay where we dropped anchor, enjoyed lunch and got ready for the afternoons excursion onto Floreana. Aboard the

pangas we checked out the coastline at a slow pace mainly because the engine to our panga kept acting up! Though we did get good looks at Ruddy Turnstone, Wandering Tattlers and an American Oystercatcher it was the two huge 5 foot Marine Iguanas that amazed everyone as they ambled slowly over the black rocks and along the sandy beach.

At Post Office Bay on Floreana we stopped at the historic 'post office', first erected as a wooden barrel in 1793 by a British (funny as it may seem) gentleman named Hathaway. It was used by whalers and passing ships through the years and continues to this day, though the site has been expanded with driftwood, signs and various artifacts. We checked the hundreds of postcards for addresses that were close by ours back home, but as surprising as it may seem there was not even one. We did leave our postcards there and who knows maybe someone will someday hand deliver one to our door.

A gentle stroll up the smooth path and over 60 feet of steps lead us to the entrance of another cave or lava tube. Along the way a few Small Ground Finches flew by and the only species that cooperated was a Galapagos Flycatcher. Back at the beach we checked out the 4-a-side football game that really was just a kick around for boat crews. On the beach a Brown Pelican herded Golden Rays into an area only to have them escape once it decided to strike. A Blue-footed Booby put on a nice show dropping from a hundred feet at 50 mph and hitting its target in 6 foot deep water. Had it been a few feet closer to the beach it might well have drilled itself into the sand and surely would have been a good candidate for the Darwin Award! Barbara, Cheri and Glenn (after showing his acrobatic side with various flips) went snorkeling, seeing an astonishing array of fish that included Butterflyfish, Bump-head and Bi-colored Parrotfish, Blenny, Panamic Sargent Major, Balloon Pufferfish, Porcupine Puffer, Guineafowl Puffer, Lizard Fish, Giant Hawk Fish, Cardinalfish, Flag Cabrilla, Salima, Leather Bass, King Angels and Gray-bar Grunts.

### **Day 7 / October 13 – Rabida and Santiago**

Following 7 hours of overnight sailing we dropped anchor around 5am at Rabida where flocks of shearwaters could be seen along with feeding, Blue-footed Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds chased Elliot's Storm-Petrels that were picking off fish from the surface. The short panga ride after breakfast stopped to view resting Blue-footed Boobies and a mass of young Marine Iguanas all grouped together on a rock. Rabida is located almost in the center of the archipelago and is the most volcanically diverse of all the islands. After landing on the dark red beach we were entertained by 2 young sea lions playing in the surf and a Brown Noddy that kept landing on a Brown Pelican's head every time it dove for breakfast. The lagoon held a pair of Greater Flamingos along with White-cheeked Pintails and a lone Semipalmated Plover. Walking up the smooth path along the spit we had wonderful views of the surrounding landscape dominated with cactus trees and palo santo trees and salt bushes by the lagoon. Galapagos Mockingbirds greeted us as we walked and both Yellow Warblers and Small Ground Finches flitted about the salt bushes. Returning to the beach, we had a very confiding Galapagos Hawk perch on a branch 7 feet off the ground. Several group members ventured in to snorkel and saw Scorpion Fish, Garden Eels and Spiny Lobster along with some of the commoner species.

During the lunch hours we sailed across the sound to Santiago where black beaches dominated the coastline. Lava flows were very evident and smooth layers of volcanic ash mixed with black lava to form marvelous formations filled with tidal pools around Puerto Eyas. Whimbrels, American Oystercatcher, Wandering Tattler, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Sandpipers along with a Sanderling and Black-bellied Plover were busy feeding amongst the lime green algae mats. At the end of our trail Fur Seals were dozing amongst the rocks and we checked out Darwin's toilet, a circular drop into the ocean that continuously filled and 'flushed'. Along our return journey we came across many Smooth-billed Anis, a flock of Yellow Warblers, a singing

Galapagos Mockingbird and a female Large Ground Finch feeding at the start of the trail. The remains of several buildings could be seen on top of the escarpment, a reminder of days not so long ago when man tried to extract salt from the crater of the tuff cone (volcano) a short distance away. Along with man came numerous domestic animals and the consequences to the native flora and fauna were devastating. An eradication program has been in effect for a while and on some islands they have made headway. In this case feral pigs have been eradicated on Santiago. Finally we were going to get a setting sun for the first time on the trip, and with beautiful evening light we watched a Blue-footed Booby feeding in the surf as we waited for the pangas.

### **Day 8 / October 14 – Fernandina and Isabella**

By first light we were still making our way south between Isabella and Fernandina. Considering it was a 12 hour journey the ride was smooth and we all had a good nights sleep.

The pangas took us towards Punta Espinoza on Fernandina stopping to view Blue-footed Boobies on lava outcroppings and a Galapagos Penguin that was curious about the lead panga. Penguins came to the Galapagos carried by the Humboldt Current, and the population was about 13,000 before the 1982-83 El Nino year. That year their vulnerability to changes in climate were demonstrated with catastrophic effect when they suffered a 85% decline in population. It is now estimated that there are about 3,000.

The skies cleared nicely and the combination of blue water and skies and landscape was much appreciated. One of the world's most active volcanos, La Cumbre at about 4900', is located here. It has erupted no less than 12 times in the last 150 years. A short distance into the Red Mangroves we came across a Hermit Crab, Lava Lizard, a dead Rice Rat, one of only two endemics to the islands, and a Medium Ground Finch. The only other finch we would see here were Small Ground Finches some of which walked over Marine Iguanas, which totally ignored them. A Galapagos Mockingbird and single Yellow Warbler rounded out the land birds. Fernandina is famous for its breeding endemic Flightless Cormorants, with a population of about 1000 individuals. Sure enough we found 7 pairs on nests all in various stages of developments. Several birds had their short wings out to dry, no doubt an ancestral habit, and one could easily see why they were flightless! The majority of the lava that we walked over was different to yesterdays, this being *pahoehoe* or smooth lava that is associated with gases and which was uplifted as recently as 1975. The contrast between lava, sand and coral and shell based sand along with a sea of Marine Iguanas basking on the rocks with crashing waves in the distance was superb. Even the bones of a Minke Whale added to the remoteness of the islands. On the lava flows, endemic Lava Cactus, with their white spines on yellow and green tufts were well adapted to the landscape growing amongst the cracks.

After boarding the boat late morning we headed across the sound towards Isabella, picking up Band-rumped as well as Elliot's Storm-Petrels, a single Common Tern and large groups of Red-necked Phalaropes. We dropped anchor in Tagus Cove and had lunch before landing on Isabella. Isabella is the largest of the islands, accounting for half the archipelago's land surface. 5 volcanoes exist on the island and all are very active. Actually Alcedo, which we were to have ridden up on horseback to look for the Galapagos Martin erupted 5 days after our trip.

This was our first full clear day and the setting in Tagus Cove, named after a British Ship in 1814 and used by whalers and pirates, was stunning with steep slopes rising on either side. The rock outcroppings had graffiti that was limited to the names of people and ships along with a date, a tradition that dated back to 1826 as far as we could see -Tropicbird '56 and Chicken of the Sea 1947 were my favorites. We spent an hour on the panga working our way along the coastline which differed from others as it did not have a rocky coastline, just vertical sides with bumps and ledges for Brown Noddies and Blue-footed Boobies to rest on. The

Noddies though seemed to prefer some ledges they found in the shade under a large overhanging rock. A Flightless Cormorant amused our panga by pecking the sides and tugging on the rope, no doubt trying to find a little something that it could add to its nest. At one stage it wanted a piece of my vest, grabbing my zipper and pulling it. It was not happy when it could not pull it off. Several penguins kept surfacing around the panga with one "mewing" and responding to our imitations. Galapagos Green Turtles were also seen in large numbers throughout the day.

Our dry landing was a success especially as we were able to negotiate the very narrow walkway to what I call the slide, an area of smooth rock that I'm sure the Sea Lions appreciated. We climbed the hillside, first over wooden steps up a steep section and then through the 'ghost forest' with views of Darwin Lake in a crater below us. It certainly seemed as though this circular lagoon was elevated above sea level, and sure enough I later read that it had been uplifted by tectonics.

Medium Ground Finches, Yellow Finches and Galapagos Mockingbirds along with a single Galapagos Hawk were seen as we slowly walked up the path. Nearing the end of the trail the landscape changed as we entered a lava outcropping, the remains of a volcanic uprising. The views from the top were stunning, looking north across a massive lava flow from Darwin's volcano, and west to a small patch of greenery on the edge of Isabella, that no doubt had one of the last remaining Mangrove Finches! Unfortunately due to their rareness we were not allowed close to here. Wolf volcano, which the equator passes through, could also be seen to the north. On the way down a finch was seen acting like a nuthatch. It was a very cooperative Woodpecker Finch, smooth olive in color with a long down-curved beak, foraging upside down along branches as well as up and down trunks.

Due to the long journey to Bartolome we set sail soon after boarding and we able to do some sea watching before the sun set. Several Dark-rumped Petrels came close to the boat and there were numerous same flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes that we were able to sneak up on. A distance away a large bird came in to harass a Galapagos Shearwater before heading away in the direction of Wolf volcano. It was a light morph skua, more than likely a South Polar Skua.

### **Day 9 / October 15 – Isla Bartolome; Baltra; Santa Cruz**

After 13 hours of sailing we dropped anchor next to Isla Bartolome and some of the most gorgeous scenery any of us had ever seen - Pinnacle Rock, the orange sand beach, the volcanic formations and colors.... At 6am we took the pangas across the bay, stopping to watch Sea Urchins, Pencil Urchins, Starfish and Hermit Crabs, to walk 365' to the top of the wooden steps, pausing numerous times at scenic points to take in the incredible site around Bartolome and across to Santiago. Everywhere we were surrounded by evidence to volcanic activity. The recent (100 years ago) lava flow that extended the island of Santiago; Pinnacle Rock, being all that remains of another recent crater or tuff cone; Lava tubes; Craters cones that dated from recent times to as long ago as 100,000 years; soft rocks that crumble in ones hand; and signs of calderas with traces of lava flowing down them. It is easy to see why this is the most photographed spot in the archipelago. The post breakfast snorkeling produced a group of White-tipped Sharks, Octopus, Trumpetfish, Christmas Tree Worm, Boxfish and Diamond Stingrays, while the panga ride produced a cooperative Galapagos Penguin drying itself on the shoreline.

We had to get to Baltra to refuel, so we set sail heading between Santiago and Santa Cruz, aiming to circle Daphne Major in the hopes of spotting a Galapagos Martin. Glenn spotted a fin close to the bow and as we closed in we could look down on the silhouette of a Hammerhead Shark, actually there were two of them as we circled around to make sure everyone got to see them. Just after this encounter we hit a patch of turbulent water and on the upper deck we began to rock back and forth. Cheri who was painting unfortunately fell off her chair and



damaged her wrist in the fall. We arranged for a visit to the hospital on Santa Cruz and dropped her off on Baltra on our way to refuel. While the boat refueled we tried to share a bench seat with sea lions, but the beachmaster had other ideas and kept us at bay. Walking along the road we could look down on the rocky coast and photograph Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Lava Herons, Lava Gulls, Brown Noddies, Wandering Tattlers, Brown Pelicans and a Medium Ground Finch....once more, but what great subjects they are.

Within half an hour the boat had refueled and it was off to Black Turtle Cove on the north side of Santa Cruz. Here we took the pangas around the mangroves where Blue-footed Boobies dove besides our zodiac and a Hawksbill Turtle drifted by. We then cut the engines and using endemic paddles (bamboo and a sheet of plywood) to silently meander through the mangroves where highlights included mating Galapagos Green Turtles, loafing White-tipped Sharks, a single Black-tipped Shark and several baby White-spotted Eagle Rays. By early evening Cheri was back on board with her left arm in a cast, taking everything in stride with her good humour.

### **Day 10 / October 16 – Kicker Rock, San Cristobal**

In the wee hours of the morning the engines started up and by daybreak we reached Kicker Rock, named for its shoe-like appearance, on the west coast of San Cristobal. Dating back over 3 million years it is along with the island San Cristobal the oldest rock in the archipelago. Split in two, our boat negotiated the narrow channel between the rocks as we looked up the sheer sides which peaked at 148 metres. Nazca Boobies could be heard calling and taking off from high above while Great Frigatebirds outnumbered Magnificent partly due to juvenile Greats still being on their large nests in small trees at the top of the island. After circling Kicker Rock three times we took one last journey through the narrow channel and then it was onto Puerto Baquerizo, the main harbor on San Cristobal. A pair of Bottle-nosed Dolphins passed in front of the bow but never stuck around to show off.

On land we spent an hour viewing the Interpretive Center that documented the trials and tribulations of the Galapagos over the centuries, before heading to the airport.

Following a stop in Quayaquil (and a little ice cream) we reached Quito at 4:15pm, which gave us a little time to bird the hotel gardens after we checked in. Highlights included a Sparkling Violetear perched feet away, a Black-tailed Trainbearer busily feeding and a male Vermillion Flycatcher.