



# Critters of the Galapagos

*Land Iguana*

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*Waved  
Albatross*

Blue-footed boobies, Sally Lightfoot crabs, waved albatross, giant tortoises, marine and land iguanas—these are some of the critters seen when visiting the Galapagos Islands. These islands, which straddle the equator, are a province of Ecuador. They lie 600 miles to the west of the mainland coast. The Galapagos consists of 13 main islands, six smaller islands and about 100 or so rocks or islets. Only four of the islands are inhabited.

The most popular way to visit the islands is by a small cruise ship. These ships usually carry 10-20 tourists, although a few carry as many as 100. Visits to the islands usually last four, seven or ten days: the longer your cruise, the more islands visited. Usually, one flies into Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and then boards a flight to the islands, usually landing at the Baltra airport, where a member of the cruise ship takes you on a bus ride to the dock, followed by a dinghy ride to the ship.

Ecuador has included the Galapagos Islands as part of its national park system. These islands have also been designated a World Heritage Site by

UNESCO. The waters surrounding the islands have been designated as a marine reserve.

Fortunately, of the 16 in the cruise group, 12 were photographers. Most carried two image-stabilized zoom lenses, 100-400mm and 24-105mm or similar. Flash photography is not allowed on the islands. Tripods were not carried. Practically everyone had a backup camera, which was fortunate because two people had cameras that failed during the trip.

Everyday, the group boarded a dinghy for a ride to a visitor's site on one of the islands. There, you make a wet landing (wade ashore) or a dry landing on rocks or a dock. The ship's guide/naturalist then leads the group on a hike along a trail. Most trails are easy walking; however, a few of the rocky trails are quite strenuous and the use of a walking stick proved most helpful. Three to four hours are spent on each visitor's site. There are more than 60 designated visitor sites on the islands. During the cruise, 14 sites located on nine different islands were visited. Following are some of the highlights.

Some of the most memorable photographic opportunities were presented on the island of **Espanola (Hood)**, which is the oldest of the island chain. It is a fairly flat island rising from sea level on the north side to rugged black cliffs about 100 feet high on the south side. This island has several species that are endemic to only this island: the marine iguana, Hood mockingbird, and lava lizard. On Gardner's Bay, the group was greeted by a large colony of sea lions. Dozens of marine iguanas and Sally Lightfoot crabs, as well as a few lava lizards and mockingbirds were spotted.



Male Frigate



Blue-footed Booby

During a hike at Punta Suarez nesting areas of the Nazca boobies and blue-footed boobies were encountered. The biggest thrill was seeing the nesting area of the waved albatross. This is the only place in the world (with the exception of a tiny island off the coast of Ecuador) where these large birds nest. The 12,000 pairs that nest here from May through December essentially represent the entire world population of these birds. Other birds seen on this hike included a Galapagos hawk, swallow-tailed gulls, and red-billed tropicbirds. A blowhole that shoots a plume of spray about 50 feet into the air was also seen. At **Punta Cormoran**, a popular landing site on Florence, is a steep, small lava cone on a point of land joined to the island by a low-lying vegetated dune. After a short walk, you will be looking down into a large lagoon, where you will see greater flamingoes and

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*Sally Lightfoot crab*



*Galapagos Penguin*

white-cheeked pintails. Other birds seen along the trail included several Darwin finches, smooth-billed anis, yellow warblers, and frigate birds flying overhead.

On **Santa Cruz** the group visited the Research Station where there are tortoise rearing and observation areas and a number of small enclosures where baby tortoises are being raised until they are old enough to be safely returned to their home islands. In the Highlands area the group was able to see giant tortoises in the wild. The first land iguanas were seen on Dragon Hill. While cruising the coastline in dinghies several small colonies of penguins on land and in the water were observed and photographed.



*Sea lions*



Giant Tortoise



**Tom Zinneman**

**Bartolome** is one of the most visited and photographed islands with the most popular view that of the Pinnacle Rock overlooking a blue cove. There is a steep trail, about 2,000 feet long, which goes to the top of an extinct lava cone. From the top, you can see five of the nearby islands. This provides a great panoramic view for photographers. **Plaza Sur** has one of the largest populations of land iguanas in the Galapagos. These larger than average yellow-brown iguanas feed on the fruit and pads of the prickly pear cactus. There are also numerous marine iguanas living along the coast.

The group spent the last day hiking on Seymour Notre (North Seymour), whose trail is a loop about a half-mile long. It goes through nesting colonies of blue-footed boobies and frigate birds where

many of the male frigate birds were displaying their inflated red gular pouch to attract the females. We were fortunate to see and photograph the birds in various phases of nesting, such as egg incubation and raising the young chicks. Along the cliffs could be seen noddy terns, shearwaters, and storm petrels in flight.

What a great way to end the visit to the Galapagos. The group had the opportunity to photograph a wide diversity of wildlife and learn about the challenges faced by wildlife and man's responsibility to protect the environment and habitats. ■

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Pinnacle Rock



Marine Iguana

