

ECUADOR, June 2008

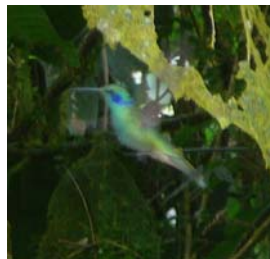
By Carolyn Wardle <cwardlef@yahoo.com>

Ecuador is a magnificent place for birds. Galapagos is a magnificent place for observing wildlife at your feet. There are over 1,600 bird species in Ecuador and about 132 species of hummingbirds. Our tour was organized by Michael Boatwright of Tico Tours.

An easy and popular area to visit is the Mindo valley, a couple of hours out of Quito, also designated an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International. Our guide for this portion was Andres de la Torre. We stayed 2 nights in the area and enjoyed birds visiting feeders around the ecolodge, a very early morning trip down the valley and just birding around the side roads. The lodge is built without undue disturbance of the natural environment, umpteen filled hummingbird feeders all around the grounds attract an amazing array of hummingbirds, several raised trays freshly supplied with bananas and grapes attract other local species.



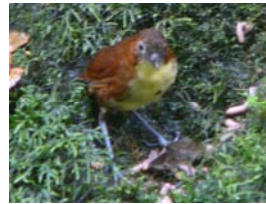
*Pale-mandibled Aracari*



*Green Violet-ear*

Early the second morning, like 04.15 start, we headed down into the valley to a nature reserve to catch the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock which appears at dawn to protect his patch against any other male usurpers. By the time there's enough light to get a photograph, they have all gone for the day. This area is privately owned and the locals put out fresh fruit daily for their visitors, so many other colourful species were seen visiting the feeding tables. The next special surprise was watching Angel Paz

calling Maria and Willie (Wilhelmina) to come for their breakfast of worms. Maria is a Giant Antpitta and Willie a Yellow-breasted Antpitta, both very difficult to see because they live in the undergrowth in very inaccessible places.



*Yellow-breasted Antpitta*



*Mike, Andres, Angel*

Angel has trained these two birds to come to his voice and he has now been requested to teach other guides to do the same thing in other locations. Angel and his family provided a wonderful welcome breakfast on our return and his children scrubbed the mud from our boots – an excellent example of a local family providing facilities for birding tourism, they have made the trails safe with steps and rope hand-holds and built blinds in strategic places. Very impressive. More hummingbird feeders along the way provided more photo opportunities.

Back in Quito one has to put one foot in each hemisphere and have one's photo taken.



*Mike & the bird group*



*Carolyn on the equator*

Next day we flew to Baltra in the Galapagos to join the yacht DAPHNE, a 16 passenger, 7 crew 70 foot comfortable motor cruiser. Occupying the seats in the waiting area for the boat were all Galapagos sealions, including one nursing its mother. Mind the poop on the ground and take a photo of the frigatebird

perched right there. Our guide for the cruise was Charly Malo, bilingual and very knowledgeable. The afternoon was spent close by with a demonstration of frigatebirds gobbling up newly hatched turtles before they could reach the water.



*Yacht DAPHNE*



*Frigatebirds feeding*

A 14 hour motor at night brought us to Isabella and Fernandina islands, both with young active volcanoes, one of which was erupting before our very eyes, though this did not impact our tour. Galapagos sealions, marine iguanas and very interesting lava flows, amongst other things, caught our attention.

Two of the rarest seagulls in the world are present here, the Lava Gull and the nocturnal Swallow-tailed Gull. It is probably nocturnal to avoid the frigatebirds that feed by worrying other birds until they drop their catch, they also steal nesting materials from birds that build nests.

Then along comes a tortoise, a giant tortoise but not a giant, only about middle aged or younger, said our guide. It lumbered up the narrow path towards our group of 16 people and continued right past us without apparently even noticing our presence. In fact that was the only truly wild tortoise we saw. They have suffered horrendous fate, particularly at the hands of whalers down the centuries that helped themselves to tortoises by the hundreds, loading them live into the boats for a long-term supply of fresh meat, then the next serious threat to their survival was the introduction of goats that successfully competed for their vegetation.



Marine iguanas are common throughout the islands. Their food is marine algae, they are efficient swimmers and will even launch themselves into the water from high rocks and ledges.



*Marine iguana*



*Land iguana*

Land iguanas are not so successful, due to competition on land and particularly from goats and pigs, that would gobble up iguana eggs as fast as they were laid. All goats and pigs have recently been removed from several uninhabited islands but there are still cat and rat issues on four inhabited islands and one or two formerly inhabited islands.



*Carefully walking the lava fields*

Walking on fresh lava fields was a new experience. Square miles of desolate black landscape was broken from time to time by

oases of fresh water surrounded by vegetation, or a solitary lava cactus struggling for existence. Most of the mangroves found in the Bahamas were identified there, plus the dreaded poison apple or manchineel in profusion along many beaches. Good idea to recognize it early.

Land birds are few but very interesting. The famous Darwin finches, from a common ancestor, have been split into more than a dozen sub-species with varying size and shaped bills.



*Warbler Finch*



*Hood Mockingbird*

Mockingbirds have been similarly isolated on different islands and have become marginally different, one being confined to one small island offshore a larger one which was once inhabited by humans. The Galapagos dove, however, seems to have remained constant and is very attractive. The flycatcher family is represented by the Galapagos flycatcher and the Vermilion Flycatcher.



*Galapagos Dove*



*Waved Albatross*

Seabirds are spectacular, particularly in the breeding season. Well known for their lack of fear of humans, one can stand within inches of Waved Albatross or Blue-footed Boobies conducting their courtship rituals. The Red-footed Boobies were not quite ready to perform for us. Male Magnificent and Great Frigatebirds inflated their red throat pouches,

hoping to attract a mate. Eggs were being incubated, a few chicks were hatching. Clearly there was more to come, but not during our visit.



*Red-footed Boobies*



*Blue-footed Booby on nest*

To add interest to our experience, we went horseback riding, the easiest way to reach the summit of a currently quiet volcano. For some, riding was a new experience, it was certainly a strain on the leg muscles. The view at the top was worth the effort.

Two species of sealion grace the Galapagos, the Galapagos Sealion being the more common, the Fur Seal smaller and less abundant. Galapagos Sealions welcome boats ashore, lie around on the best beaches, tumble in the surf, swim with the tourists, have so much fun. They are the epitome of a relaxed life. One parked itself on the stern platform of our boat while we were ashore.

We saw some Green Turtles, few dolphins and no whales, mainly because the boat moved on at night. However, watching the nocturnal Swallow-tailed Gull following the boat in the dark was impressive.

I sent two postcards to myself, one with no stamp. There's a famous old whaling post office on one of the islands where anyone can leave a postcard or letter for someone else to collect and mail later. I wonder if I will ever see mine again. You bring the same number of cards that you leave, then later mail them from your home base. I picked up a card for Australia and another for Germany.





*Post Office on Isabella*



*Post Office on Floreana*

For anyone interested, there are Bahama Pintails in the Galapagos. How did they get there?? Hitchhikers on our boat included gulls, pelicans and frigatebirds. Watching the White-vented Storm Petrels dancing in our wake was fun, as was watching the Blue-footed Boobies diving for fish – trying to catch these antics on camera was even more fun.

We went to the metropolis of Puerto Ayala to visit the Charles Darwin Foundation. Here they raise tortoises from all the islands, collecting the eggs and hatching them in safe captivity until they can be returned to the wild. Each baby tortoise is numbered with a different colour paint for the island of its origin, so that it can later be returned to the correct island.

A different tortoise shell shape has evolved in the Galapagos, called the saddleback with the front of the shell raised and these animals have much longer necks, so they can reach up for higher vegetation. One such individual is the



*Dome*



*Saddleback*

famous “Lonesome George” which, being the last surviving specimen on his particular island, was taken in to the foundation about 25 years ago. Unfortunately he has failed to reproduce, despite modern technology, so he will probably remain the last survivor from Pinta Island.

For landbirds, one has to be content with the Galapagos Dove, Hawk, Cuckoo, Martin, Galapagos and Vermilion Flycatchers, Yellow Warbler, several sub-species of mockingbird and of course the famous Darwin finches, which have evolved some 14 different shaped bills depending on their diet.



*Galapagos penguin,  
the only penguin found north of the equator*

All in all, a fantastic Ecuadorian experience. For continental birds, there’s another 1,500 to see, for the islands, birds are just part of the overall picture. One cannot cruise these islands without being quite fascinated by the hostile volcanic terrain and how the different species arrived there in the first place, some 600 miles from any large land mass. In spite of man’s usual destructive behaviour since the islands were first mapped by early navigators, now the Galapagos National Park Service manages all the protected areas, including tourism. All local guides are well trained and qualified, no visitor may go ashore without a guide, all paths are clearly marked and everyone goes ashore in only a few places, leaving the majority of every island undisturbed. There’s a lesson here for many other island nations to follow.

