

Regional Guide – Wildlife

A Journey through the Galápagos

Birds

A careful observer visiting the Galápagos for a week should be able to spot forty species of birds. There are fifty-eight resident species on the Galápagos, twenty-eight of which are endemic. Over thirty other migrant species regularly visit the archipelago, some of whom you may have seen further north last fall.

Boobies

Thanks to their easily identifiable features—and ever-amusing name—boobies are usually the first birds to be spotted by visitors. The blue-footed booby could be the most famous Galápagos bird. Big, whitish brown with bright blue feet. A truly enchanting sight is the blue-foot's mating dance, where he will show off his bright blues in a high-stepping, sky-pointing, wing-spreading ensemble sure to charm any admirer's heart. Nesting on rocky seashores and feeding close to shore.

The masked booby is pure white with a black band at the edges of its wings and tail. Black, bare skin surrounds its bill, lending this booby his bank-robber resemblance. Nesting on sea cliffs, and feeding out at intermediate distances, this is the largest of the boobies, though they are all similar in shape: a projectile body shape with forward facing eyes that allow stereo vision while diving for fish. The red-footed booby has (you guessed it!) red feet and a blue bill. The smallest of the boobies, it is also the most infrequently spotted. Living on the smaller outer islands, it hunts further out at sea than the other two, and nests in trees.

Frigatebirds

It is their large wingspan-to-weight ratio that allows these birds to be dazzling aviators. Being adept in the air is a necessity for the frigatebirds since their feathers aren't waterproof enough to allow them a diving existence. Frigatebirds instead resort to pestering birds that have already done the fishing for them, pulling at their feathers midair until they drop their food allowing the frigatebirds to swoop in. Periodically eating by aerial piracy doesn't mean they need to eat this way all the time. The male great frigatebird has a green sheen on its back, while the female has white breast feathers up to her chin, and a red eye-ring.

The magnificent frigatebird's back sheen is more purple in colour, and the female's eye-ring is blue. The most magnificent feature by far is the bright red gular sac exhibited on the males of both species. They are able to inflate the sac to attract the attention of potential mates.

Cormorants

The flightless cormorant is the only flightless seabird in the world besides the penguin, and it is endemic to the Galápagos. Having no predators on these islands, this cormorant ancestors, who were most certainly able to fly, survived best if they had more streamlined bodies with less resistance in the water to dive. There are only 700–800 pairs in the Galápagos, so the best bet of seeing some are on Isabel and Fernandina islands.

Penguins

The Galápagos Islands are an archipelago of extremes and exceptionality. This is also the closest any penguin species will get to the North Pole! The Galápagos penguin can survive this far north thanks to the Humboldt Current that flows from the Antarctic. The best way to appreciate the penguins is to snorkel with them, where you can witness firsthand why these birds needn't fly! Their prodigious skill as swimmers redeems their distinguished clumsiness on land. There are colonies on the western parts of Isabela and Fernandina, and a small colony on Isla Bartolome.

Other seabirds

A splendid sight to see is the red-billed tropicbird, nesting in cliff crevices or rock piles. Their distinguishing features are two tail feathers as long as their white bodies. The brown pelican is recognizable by its distinctive pouched bill and large size. Often seen feeding with pelicans, or perhaps feeding off the pelican's rejected food items, is the little brown noddie tern. Three species of storm petrel, the dark-rumped petrel, and the Audubon's shearwater are also common sights. Its bright red feet and eye ring can identify the only nocturnal gull in the world, the swallow-tailed gull. The other species of gull on the islands is the lava gull, the rarest gull in the world; only 400 pairs exist.

Shore and wetland birds

The largest heron on the islands is the great blue heron. With a wingspan of two metres, it is easily recognizable by its long neck and legs. The all-white cattle egret is found in similar habitats as the heron—along rocky coasts. The small lava heron is the only endemic heron on the islands. Also common are the striated heron and the yellow-crowned night heron. Be sure to be quiet if you spot the greater flamingo as this pink, easily identifiable bird is quite nervous and may desert its nest if it feels you are too close. Along rocky coasts and in lagoons, you might spot the black and white American oystercatcher or the black-necked stilt. Other shorebirds include the semi-palmated plover, ruddy turnstone, and other sandpiper family members.

Finches

While they are some of the most famous of the birds on the islands, Darwin's finches are nothing spectacular to look at. There are thirteen species in existence on the islands, and all are thought to have descended from a common ancestor. Differences in distribution, body size, plumage, beak size and shape, and feeding habits helped Darwin form his theory of evolution. Famous species include the warbler finch, the small ground finch, and the large cactus finch. With names as spectacular as their colouration, a few of Darwin's finches have at least gained popularity through their use of tools

for obtaining prey from trees—the woodpecker finch and the mangrove finch are two of such species with special talents for survival.

Other land birds

In the highlands you may spot the vermilion flycatcher, or the endemic large-billed (Galápagos) flycatcher. There are four species of fearless mockingbirds on the islands, all of which are endemic. Easily identifiable is the only yellow-coloured bird in the Galápagos, the yellow warbler, and the tough to spot dark-billed cuckoo is about as common.

Raptors

Already extinct on certain islands, the endemic Galápagos hawk allows visitors to approach them as close as one metre. It is perhaps this fearlessness that has led to their being overhunted. There are two species of owl on the islands, but due to nocturnal habits, only one is usually seen. The barn owl hunts at night and the short-eared owl exhibits diurnal hunting habits, so could be spotted along your journey.

Reptiles

Since there are no predatory mammals on any of the islands, reptiles have exploded as the primary land animals in existence here. Most of the two dozen species are endemic to the islands.

Tortoises

When you think of the Galápagos Islands, images of the giant tortoise immediately come to mind. It is this tortoise for which the islands were named: Galápagos literally means “giant tortoise.” There are fourteen subspecies of tortoise, which are distinguished by markings on their carapace. Over time, whalers and sealers killed thousands of tortoises, and only 15,000 remain.

Reaching almost three hundred kilograms in weight, these creatures can outlive a human, living to be about 150 years old—and some have been rumoured to live over 250! Mating occurs in the rainy season, and females dig nests in dry sandy areas.

Marine turtles

The only resident breeding sea turtle is the Pacific green sea turtle. Huge animals, reaching about 150 kilograms, these turtles can be seen while snorkeling. Between December and June, females will crawl ashore and bury a nest of dozens of eggs on the sandy beach. Hatching occurs after sixty days, and then newborns emerge and make the quest for the sea. Those that aren't eaten by predators must make their way to the ocean and return to the very same beach to mate years later.

Iguanas

The most frequently seen reptile on the islands is the iguana. There are three species you might spot: the marine iguana, the Galápagos land iguana, and the Santa Fe land iguana. Marine iguanas are the

only seagoing lizards in the world. They feed mainly on seaweed that grows in intertidal zones and can dive for up to one hour to obtain the submerged plants. To expel excess salt ingested while diving, they snort a salty spray from salt glands located between their eyes and nostrils. These salt glands are not exclusive to the marine iguana, as other species of iguana, and many seabirds also possess them. The two species of land iguana are quite similar in appearance. Both are larger than their marine counterpart, and both are yellowish, weighing up to about six kilograms.

Other reptiles

There are seven species of Galápagos lava lizards you may spot scurrying across rocks, but you may also spot the gecko, a small, harmless, nocturnal lizard with adhesive pads on its feet that allow it to climb up your hotel wall and onto your ceiling. There is also a snake on the islands: the Galápagos snake, which is small, drab, and non-poisonous.

Mammals

There are only six native species of mammal. The low number is possibly due to the inaccessibility of the islands, and the difficulty of reaching the islands for larger mammals. Bats could arrive by flight, rats by rafts of floating vegetation, and seals would obviously swim.

Seals

The Galápagos sea lion has a population of about 50,000 throughout the archipelago. Territorial bulls reaching up to 250 kilograms guard breeding grounds and have been known to chase swimmers out of the water. The females and young are extremely playful, however, and you can often snorkel close to them—they are just as curious about you as you are about them! The endemic Galápagos fur seal has dense and luxurious fur, which attracted many sealers to decimate the population in the nineteenth century for demands on the mainland for fur fashions. To see them is less likely, simply because there are fewer of them.

Whales and dolphins

There are seven species of whale commonly recorded in the region: finback, sei, humpback, minke, sperm, orca, and pilot whales. Bottle-nosed dolphins are seen surfing bow waves, and at night surrounded by bioluminescent creatures they disturb as they swim through water.

Bats and rats

The Galápagos red bat is active at night when it feeds on nocturnal insects, and roosts in mangrove forests during the day. Little is known about their life cycles. Rice rats on the islands have been reduced to only three remaining species of seven thought to inhabit the archipelago. They eat mainly plants and are most active at night.

Fish

Fifty species of fish are endemic to the Galápagos, with an additional 350 others recorded. To give you a start, you might see blue-eyed damselfish, white-banded angelfish, yellow-tailed surgeonfish, Moorish idols, blue parrotfish, concentric puffer fish, yellow-bellied triggerfish, and hieroglyphic hawkfish.

Sharks

The most common species are the white-tipped reef shark and the Galápagos shark. If you can get out scuba diving, you have a good chance of spotting hammerhead sharks.

Rays

Sometimes seen basking in the shallows on sandy bottoms, stingrays pack an electric punch that inflicts a painful wound on unwary waders or paddlers who happen to disturb them. By shuffling your feet along the sandy bottom, you will give the rays a good chance to get away without feeling threatened. In deeper waters you might spot the spotted eagle ray, the golden mustard ray, or the less frequently spotted manta ray. The manta ray can be seen leaping out of the water, making a huge splash when they land.

Invertebrates

Sometimes underappreciated by the wildlife enthusiast, invertebrates are easy to come by in the Galápagos, just as in any other place on Earth. If you happen to be splashing in the intertidal zone, or looking down when you are approaching your landing site, you might see barnacles, lobsters, jellyfish, sea anemones, starfish, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, sand dollars, and three types of crab (Sally Lightfoot, ghost, and hermit). Over 1,600 species of insects can be found in the Galápagos, though many common insects in other areas of the world will be missing here, such as mayflies and stick insects. Some common insect sightings could include painted locust, carpenter bee, sulphur butterfly, and the green hawkmoth.