

Notes on an independent Galapagos birding trip, May 2023



Introduction

These brief notes are intended to be used in conjunction with George Wagner's excellent report, following his "Option 4" i.e. independent travel, which we used as the basis for organising our 10-day trip:-

https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=WAGNER_Galapagos_0708_2018.pdf

Many thanks to George, and also Malcolm Roxby who drew my attention to this report, and provided additional information.

Pre-trip

We booked the Espanola trip eight months in advance with Islanders Galapagos. The tour was excellent - see my (PlymouthPete19) Trip Advisor review. We also pre-booked accommodation in the main "towns" of the three islands we visited, via booking.com and Airbnb (reviews also on Trip Advisor): La K-leta & Casita Muyuyo on Santa Cruz; Sun Island on Isabela; and Dolphin House on San Cristobal.

Flights to and from Quito (with LATAM) and the inter-island ferries, were also all booked well in advance. We were told that these ferries can be cancelled if there's insufficient demand, and conversely, all the ones we used were full. So advance booking may be a good option.

We took A Pocket Guide to Birds of Galapagos by Tui De Roy which was of some use, but I found the information on the Merlin app much better for identification, especially of Darwin's finches.

For departure at Quito airport, you need to: 1. buy a permit from the kiosk near the entrance (\$20 each); 2. take your bags through the scanner area and get them tagged; 3. get strickers for your bags from one of the machines; 4. drop bags at counter. (This process is not clear when you arrive). At Galapagos, you then pay \$100 entrance fee, at the airport and this needs to be in cash.

We took cash but found plenty of ATMs in the main towns, for top-ups.

Arrival

We flew into Balra airport, took the bus across the island (buy your ticket at the kiosk outside the airport first) and then the ferry to Santa Cruz where it was easy to get a bus to Puerto Ayora (\$5). There are lots of \$1 charges all over Galapagos, to enter the quay, exit the quay, get on the small boat to the ferry etc!

Birds

Santa Cruz:-

Charles Darwin Research Station: we broadly saw the species mentioned by George Wagner, but also Dark-billed Cuckoo (twice in the same spot, by the blue gate towards the end of the track to the last beach beyond the centre) and at least one Elliot's Storm Petrel off-shore.

Tortuga Beach Trail: again species broadly reflected those in George's report; a particularly good spot for Galapagos Flycatcher.

Media Luna to Cerro Crocker: we took a taxi from Puerto Ayora to the trail head at Media Luna and arranged for it to pick us up at the same spot. We walked to the highest point at Cerro Crocker (the radio station) on the wet and overgrown path. We saw / heard Galapagos Crakes at two spots and plenty of Green Warbler-Finches but didn't see Paint-billed Crake (which a local told me is no longer there but can be seen at El Chato Tortoise Ranch) nor Large Tree Finch (which we didn't see anywhere). Otherwise species overlapped with George's list. A morning was enough for this trip.

Balra: our only Galapagos Doves other than on Espanola, were seen from the bus; and from the ferry, we saw Galapagos Shearwaters and Brown Noddies.

Yellow-crowned Night Herons were nesting by the quay in Puerto Ayora.

Isabela

Puerto Villamil: we saw three Galapagos Penguins on the rocks described by George, from a boat trip (booked via our accommodation) which also landed on one of the islands and included an hour's snorkelling (which also means you have a chance of seeing a Penguin swimming underwater). Other sightings on this trip included a handful of Blue-footed Boobies and Wandering Tattlers. We subsequently saw Penguins very distantly through a 'scope, from the quay and from the ferry on departure.

(Boat trips from Puerto Villamil further west along the coast, where Penguins can also be seen, had apparently, been suspended due to an accident).

A few American Flamingos showed very well on the lake by Los Flamingos road, and two more frequented the lake (marked "Posada De Flamengos" on Google maps) just north of the Giant Tortoise centre which can be accessed via a boardwalk on the west side of the town. The odd Elliot's Storm Petrel was viewable from the beach in the town and our only wild Giant Tortoise of the trip was beside the track which leads west from the town past the cemetery and towards El Estero.

Sierra Negra Highlands: I hired a bike and cycled towards the volcano rim but eventually had to abandon the trip, due to the weather. I therefore didn't see either of the key endemics here, but en route, saw Small Tree Finches, a Woodpecker Finch and (on the track which loops from the road to a view point) another Dark-billed Cuckoo. The weather was fine lower down!

San Cristobal

Puerto Baquerizo Moreno: from the viewing platform at Muelle Tijeretas we had good views of a few Swallow-tailed Gulls on the cliffs. Seabirds including Galapagos Petrels and Elliot's Storm Petrels, were reasonably close in, off Playa Punta Carola. We saw several San Cristobal Mockingbirds in this area but not most of the other species mentioned by George. (The interpretation centre was closed and appeared to be under refurbishment).

Espanola

Everything mentioned by George showed really well on the island and we had no difficulty in independently finding the key birds whilst on the guided tour. However, it's worth mentioning your targets to the guide. Once she knew what birds we wanted to see, our guide was very good in ensuring we'd seen them.

The seabirding on the trip to and from Espanola was truly wonderful with some great views compared to the ferries which move much faster. Our boat, "Valeria 1" also had plenty of space and offered two levels, meaning you could view many birds at eye level or from above (useful for Storm Petrel identification). At times, especially on the way back, flocks of Petrels were lingering off the back of the boat. Sightings included, c20 Elliot's Storm Petrels, a few Band-rumped Storm Petrels, c50 Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels, a dozen Galapagos Petrels, half-a-dozen Galapagos Shearwaters, a few Waved Albatrosses (well away from Espanola) and singles of Markham's Storm Petrel, Sooty Tern and Red-footed Booby. (Although I scanned the Frigatebirds I saw during this excursion and on the rest of the trip as a whole, I failed to find a Great). We also encountered a pod of over 100 Bottle-nosed Dolphins.

Inter-island Ferries

The speed and seating arrangements of these ferries mean they are not ideal for birding; but they do offer some opportunities to see certain sea birds. Some have rows of front-facing seating and others have benches along the sides. Whichever you get, the trick is to sit as close to the back as possible, so you stand the best chance of getting a view of anything. The further you get inside, the worse it gets. The first people to get on the boat, get to pick any seat, so aim to get there early.

Viewing conditions meant many birds remained unidentified, but by persisting, we managed to identify the following from the three ferry trips we took: a few Band-rumped and one Wedge-rumped Storm Petrel; a total of c30 Galapagos Petrels; hundreds of Galapagos Shearwaters (mainly on the crossing to Isabella); a few Brown Noddies; and a few Blue-footed & Nazca Boobies.

Conclusion

Thanks to the information we sourced pre-trip, we had a really enjoyable and productive independent visit to Galapagos.

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