

Ecuador 2022

Galapagos, Quito and Tumbes endemics

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Day 1: Puembo, Quito

On the first day of a mixed professional & birding trip to Ecuador, I booked one night at the Puembo Birding Garden <https://puembobirdinggarden.com/>, as my flight from Quito to the Galapagos was only scheduled one day later. Puembo is situated at the rural outskirts of Quito and the whole town has a quiet, village-like feel – all situated conveniently close to the airport. Mercedes, the host of Puembo Birding Garden, is a very friendly and very knowledgeable birder who gave me good advice to explore the area surrounding the hotel grounds. Thanks to her tips, I managed to see and hear my first **Croaking Ground Doves**, which are scarce in the Quito area. I also spotted a stunning male **Vermilion Flycatcher**, and **Black-and-White Seedeaters** in an overgrown orchard north of the hotel along Calle Luis Burbano. The hotel lobby/seating area has been turned in a bird hide – ideal conditions to watch the birds in the garden while processing your jetlag. Three species of hummingbirds were present in the garden: the **Western Emerald**, **Rufous-tailed Hummingbird** and **Sparkling Violetear**. I had great views of **Blue-gray Tanagers**, and of the rarer **Scrub Tanagers** and **Blue-and-Yellow Tanagers**. Around the hotel, I also spotted **Golden Grosbeak**, **Hooded Siskin**, **Cinereous Conebill**, **Tropical Mockingbird**, **Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant** and many **Saffron Finches**. For a full list of the birds I observed at Puembo, see: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S115172147>. The place offers a great introduction to neo-tropical birding in an entirely birder-centred setting, and formed an ideal starting point for my trip.

Day 2: Baltra & Santa Cruz, Galapagos

After a short birding walk around Puembo Birding Garden in the morning I headed to Quito airport and took the Avianca plane to the Galapagos. Upon arrival at Baltra Airport, I saw my first Galapagos lifer: one of the legendary ‘Darwin finches’ – seeing this **Small Ground-Finch** while queuing at ‘Galapagos Ecological Airport’ seemed incongruous yet felt great! Many of these ‘finches’ (they are actually tanagers (*Thraupidae*)) hopped and flew around in the airport’s main hall, acting as House Sparrows do in so many other places around the world. And just like the House Sparrows, they were being completely ignored by the arriving tourists. I then took a bus to the south end of Baltra Island, where water taxis make the crossing to Santa Cruz. During that short bus drive I had good views of a **Galapagos Dove** in flight and of a basking **Land Iguana** – both endemics and lifers of course. A very promising start of the Galapagos stretch of my journey! At Baltra dock and on the crammed boat I did not know where to look: my first **Blue-footed Boobies** flew along, many **Brown Noddies** and **Brown Pelicans** were present, while **Galapagos Shearwaters** and **Magnificent Frigatebirds** were everywhere. Hundreds of **Sally Lightfoot Crabs** (*Grapsus grapsus*) lined the shore. Arriving at Santa Cruz Island I waited to get a –very cheap– bus to the main town of Puerto Ayora as I watched the seabirds above the Itabaca Channel. I managed to see my first **Galapagos Warbler** in a mangrove patch near the harbour. **Small Ground-Finches** were feeding on the cafeteria tables nearby. I also saw my first, very colourful and aptly named **Painted Locusts** there. The bus crossed the entire island of Santa Cruz and I was surprised by the lush vegetation of the highlands which I would visit later on. I arrived in Puerto Ayora in late afternoon and headed to the apartment I rented (an AirBnB situated at the very eastern edge of town, across Hostal Pinzon). The views

over the shrubland and low hills to the east, and to the Pacific Ocean on the south side, were stunning. **Frigatebirds** were flying above town, effortlessly and kite-like. From a distance, the difference between **Magnificent Frigatebird** and **Great Frigatebird** is hard to spot, but **Magnificent Frigatebird** is apparently the most common of the two species. A loud **Small Ground-Finch** used my balcony as a singing post and I spotted a few **Smooth-billed Anis** in the shrubs – a new species to me, but not an endemic. The **Smooth-billed Anis** were introduced to the islands in the 1960s and are now quite common. I heard and saw a few **Galapagos Warblers** too. I walked further east along the car-free Avenida Darwin, to reach the grounds of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) which consists of a few clusters of scattered buildings in the coastal shrubland. It was a nice short walk along the paved bicycle road to Playa de la Estacion, a beautiful yet tiny beach which was crowded when I visited the first time in late afternoon. The place was rich in birdlife though and the CDF grounds formed an ideal introduction to Galapagos birding. I spotted **Ruddy Turnstones**, lots of **Marine Iguanas** and a lone **Great Blue Heron** on the small, mangrove-fringed and crab-covered CDF dock, and **Galapagos Mockingbirds** were conspicuous, perching on cactus and taller trees along the road. At Playa de la Ratonera (a bit further east), I sat on a log on the beach and spotted my first **Wandering Tattlers** and an **American Whimbrel** as well as group of foraging **White-vented Storm Petrels** and many passing **Brown Pelicans**, **frigatebirds** and **Blue-footed Boobies**. A near-endemic **Swallow-tailed Gull** and an endemic **Lava Gull** (the rarest gull in the world!) flew past – great birding moments indeed! I spotted my first, confident **Galapagos Flycatcher** near the CDF cafeteria. **Small and Medium Ground-Finches** were numerous there too. I then walked all the way to Academy Bay harbour where I spotted my first **Galapagos Sea Lion** among the many **Brown Pelicans**. Along the boardwalk which encircles the small mangrove patch in Academy Bay, **Brown Pelicans** could be spotted from less than a meter away. It's also where I spotted my first –and only- **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** of the trip. After this first glance at Puerto Ayora, I headed back to my apartment – having seen my fair share of spectacular species, most of these up close. Many **Cattle Egrets** flew over at dusk while I processed my first half day on the Galapagos with a cold beer on the balcony.

Day 3: Santa Cruz: Charles Darwin Foundation, Playa Tortuga

I got up early to watch birds on the grounds of the Charles Darwin Foundation and on the two beaches (Playa de la Estacion and Playa de la Ratonera) which were completely deserted in the early morning. I started the day with a swim – the wildlife around me was stunning. **Marine Iguanas** were basking in the sun, a **Lava Heron** was feeding among the **Sally Lightfoot Crabs**, and **Brown Pelicans**, **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, **Blue-footed Boobies** and a **Lava Gull** flew over – all while I was in the water. In the water, I spotted **Bullseye Puffer** and small rays. A **Spotted Sandpiper** and a few **Ruddy Turnstones** were foraging on the small beach, while **Galapagos Warbler** and **Small Ground-Finch** were incredibly tame in the bushes fringing the sandy beach which I shared with a lone **Galapagos Sea Lion**. I then decided to focus on 'Darwin finches' on the grounds of the Charles Darwin Foundation – and my observations exceeded my expectations. Especially the trail at the eastern edge of the CDF grounds, leading up to the hills up north (going past the '*Centro de crianza Fausto Llerena*' – where captive giant tortoises can be seen well) was very productive. I managed to spot five species at close range, and I could watch the differences in bill size and shape as well as behaviour – great observations again. Next to **Small Ground-Finch** and **Medium Ground-Finch**, I spotted my first massive-billed **Large Ground-Finches**. A few **Common Cactus-Finches** were foraging on flowering cacti while I only saw one **Vegetarian Finch**, a male, close to the steps leading up to the hill. **Smooth-billed Anis**, **Galapagos Warblers**, **Galapagos Flycatchers** and **Galapagos Mockingbirds** were all easy to spot too. After lunch I headed to Tortuga Bay, at the western end of town. The walk from Playa de la Ratonera to Tortuga Bay beach took me about an hour. The trail to Tortuga Bay is mostly shaded from the moment you leave town, and the common, by now familiar bird species were easy to spot along the way. **Lava Lizards** were also exceedingly common along that trail. Tortuga Bay Beach is a spectacular sight: a long, white sandy beach fringed by coastal dunes with mangroves and rocks in the distance. The beach is dotted with –marked and protected– sea turtle nests, and a few **Marine Iguanas** bask in the sun. Heading west, one eventually reaches Tortuga Lagoon (also known as Playa Mansa), which is a sheltered, shallow bay which is ideal for

swimming. Although that beach was relatively crowded when I visited in the afternoon, the place is still utterly spectacular and is teeming with easily visible wildlife. From the beach I could spot many **Green Turtles** as well as a few **White-tipped Reef Sharks** swimming in the shallows. **Brown Pelicans** and **Lava Gulls** were flying over regularly. I rented a kayak at the western end of the beach and explored the mangrove-fringed lagoon. While kayaking I literally spotted tens of **Green Turtles**! I also spotted **Lava Herons**, **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, **Wandering Tattlers**, **Brown Pelicans** and **Galapagos Warblers** and a couple of loud **Black-necked Stilts**. A few **Sanderlings** and **Grey Plovers** were feeding among the seaweed at the western end of the beach. While drying on the beach afterwards I spotted incredibly tame **Small Ground-Finches**. Heading back to town, I rented a bicycle and met my friend Filip, who had just arrived with the ferry from San Cristobal, at the Puerto Ayora Malecon.



Galapagos Sea Lion (Zalophus wollebaecki), Playa de la Estacion, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé



Marine Iguana (Amblyrhynchus cristatus), Playa de la Rattonera, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé



Brown Pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis urinator), Tortuga Bay, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé



*Pacific Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas agassisi*) nesting site, Tortuga Bay, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé*



*Small Ground-Finch (*Geospiza fuliginosa*), Tortuga Bay, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé*

Day 4: Santa Cruz: Puerto Ayora & Highlands (El Manzanillo & Los Gemelos)

We started the day early and headed to the beaches close to town, along the path leading to the Charles Darwin Foundation. At the empty Playa de la Ratonera, we spotted our first **Galapagos Pintail** and a lone **Galapagos Oystercatcher**, while **White-vented Storm Petrels** and **Brown Noddies** were foraging at sea and **Lava Herons** and **Wandering Tattlers** were feeding on the **Marine Iguana**- and crab-covered boulders fringing the beach. A few **Lava Gulls** flew by. Again **Galapagos Flycatchers** and **Galapagos Warblers** gave away great views. On the CDF grounds, **Common Cactus-Finches**, and **Small and Medium Ground-Finches** were present. In the afternoon we went to the Santa Cruz Highlands with a cab. Based on advice from CDF contacts we headed to 'Rancho El Manzanillo', located at km 15 on the Baltra Road from Puerto Ayora. This private ranch is a so-called 'turtle farm', where wild giant tortoises can be seen and where guided tours are provided to tourists. Just before parking the car, a small brown rail crossed the road – the endemic and hard-to-spot **Galapagos Rail**! That was a great start to our visit. Although guided tours were compulsory, we managed to explore the place on our. The Santa Cruz highlands are covered in lush vegetation and while much of the vegetation is not native, the mix of agricultural fields, meadows with grazing cattle and small woodland patches is relatively species-rich (for an island, that is..). It was a totally different feel to wander around among the tall trees and the wet grasslands, compared to the dry shrub along the coast. We soon spotted our first wild **Galapagos Giant Tortoises** (*Chelonoides porteri*) – a magnificent sight. As we approached them, some were totally oblivious of our presence while others started hissing. We saw the tortoises in the open grassland and in the dense thickets close to the lake, where **Common Gallinule** and **Galapagos Pintails** were present. **Small Ground-Finch**, **Galapagos Warbler**, **Galapagos Mockingbird** and **Smooth-billed Anis** were also present. We were very happy to get good views of the **Small Tree-Finch** – which added another species of Darwin finches to our trip list. After a cold drink at the nice terrace of the El Manzanillo ranch, we headed to 'Los Gemelos' (the twins) - two large sinkholes in the highlands surrounded by endemic, moss-covered *Scalesia* forest. This was again an entirely different biotope. The place was quiet, windy and moist, but also very accessible along a winding trail. We spotted four **Galapagos Doves** along the lush crater walls and we spotted multiple **Green Warbler-finches** with their characteristic thin, thorn-like bills. Towards the end of the hike we spotted two **Woodpecker Finches** – we were delighted to observe their nuthatch-like behaviour. One of them even used a stick to extract insects from the bark of a *Scalesia* tree – an awesome observation! The only target species we did not see up there was the Little Vermillion Flycatcher, but it seems to be on the edge of extinction on Santa Cruz. We headed back to town when dusk set in, just in time to watch the evening flights of **Cattle Egrets** above Puerto Ayora and to observe the circling **Magnificent Frigatebirds** in the fading light.



Lava Gull (Larus fuliginosus), pic by Filip Colson



Marine Iguana (Amblyrhynchus cristatus), pic by Filip Colson



Brown Pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis urinator) & Magificent Frigatebird (Fregata magnificens) Academy Bay, Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé

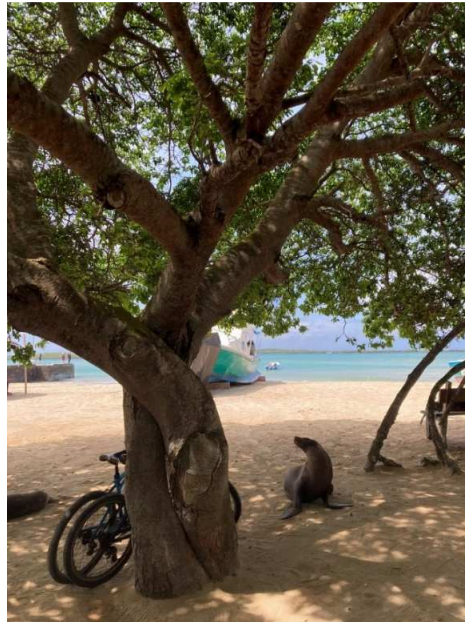


Galapagos Giant Tortoise (Chelonoides porteri), El Manzanillo, Santa Cruz, pic by Jean Hugé

Day 5: Isabela: Puerto Villamil, Los Humedales, Camino de las Tortugas

In the early morning, we took a small crowded boat for a bumpy two and half hour ride to Puerto Villamil, on the island of Isabela – the largest island of the archipelago. It's the only regular way for independent travelers to travel between islands and it's far from comfortable and some people aboard got really sick. But I enjoyed the trip a lot as it was the first taste of a 'Galapagos pelagic' – even though observations were not always easy given the speed of the boat. The density of seabirds was particularly high at sea. I spotted a few **Galapagos Petrels** and **Nazca Boobies** (both lifers of course!), as well as tens of **Band-rumped Storm Petrels**. **Galapagos Shearwaters** were the most common species at sea while I also spotted **Magnificent** and **Great Frigatebirds**, **Brown Noddies**, **Blue-footed Boobies** and a few **Swallow-tailed Gulls**. When the island of Isabela came into view I started to notice a few **Galapagos Sea Lions** as well as the fin and back of a large (possible Galapagos) **shark**! Upon arrival at the small harbour of Puerto Villamil we were welcomed by numerous noisy **Galapagos Sea Lions** on the docks, in the water and on the beach – while **Galapagos Warblers** were particularly conspicuous. We immediately liked the 'vibe' on Isabela – a much quieter, more laid-back and much less developed place than the busy seafront of Puerto Ayora. We took a cab along the mostly sand-covered 'main road' of Puerto Villamil, to get to 'Hostal La Jungla' at the very western edge of town – a cool, simple hostel with an 'end of the world'-feel, flanked by the beach on one side, mangroves on the other side and a dry plain leading to the edge of the National Park on the west. Great ocean and park views allowed us to watch **Galapagos Warblers**, **Brown Pelicans** and **Blue-footed Boobies**. We went for a walk through the mangroves just east of Hostal La Jungla and then up north towards the Isabela Giant Tortoises Breeding Centre (*centro de crianza tortugas gigantes*). Despite the heat and the blinding sunlight, we could not wait to start exploring the area: we had great views of a lone **American Flamingo** in one of the lagoons and there were many **Galapagos Pintails** around. **Black-headed Stilts**, **Small Ground-Finch**, **Common Gallinule** and **Galapagos Mockingbirds** were also present along the pools and mangrove patches. Walking north, parts of the trail crosses a drier landscape where we had great views of **Common Cactus Finch** foraging on *Opuntia* cacti. We headed towards the centre of town along the sand-covered main road and had a good and cheap lunch. We then rented bicycles to ride the Camino de las Tortugas – a gravel road going west into the National Park, passing the internationally important wetlands (the '*Humedales del Sur de Isabela*', <https://rsis Ramsar.org/ris/1202>) until the Wall of Tears (*Muro de las Lagrimas*), a 100-meter long wall of lava blocks which is all that remains of a former prison. Part of the trail runs along the desolate, beautiful sandy beach before going through the shrubland, forest and lagoons and then gradually gaining height. We took in the great views at the Mirador Cerro Ochila where we shared the viewing platform with **Galapagos Mockingbirds**. Along the beach, **Sanderlings**, **Grey Plovers** and **Ruddy Turnstones** were present. In the lagoons, we spotted **Galapagos Pintails**, and a **Medium Ground-Finch** was singing from a cactus nearby. We encountered several **Giant Tortoises** along the road, as well

as **Marine Iguanas** and **Lava Lizards**. Seeing the tortoises up close, some feeding, some moving slowly in the roadside vegetation or crossing the road, was a great experience. I can't resist citing a passage from Darwin's 'Voyage of the Beagle' here '*..As I was walking along I met two large tortoises, each of which must have weighed at least 200 pounds: one was eating a piece of cactus, and as I approached, it stared at me and slowly stalked away; the other gave a deep hiss, and drew in its head. These huge reptiles, surrounded by the black lava, the leafless shrubs, and large cacti, seemed to my fancy like some antediluvian animals*'. On the way back, it started to rain and Filip got a flat tyre – but we still enjoyed this great wildlife area. I went for a swim along the beach at the entrance of the National Park, and watched **Brown Noddies**, **American Whimbrels**, **Blue-footed Boobies**, **Frigatebirds** and **Brown Pelicans**. Heading back to town by taxi (with the bicycles in the back..) we stopped at the Mirador El Mango for great ocean and volcano views. While having a drink at the Sunset Bar, a few **Lava Gulls** flew by at close range.



Galapagos Sea Lion (Zalophus wollebaecki) Puerto Villamil, Isabela, pic by Jean Hugé



American Flamingo (Phoenicopterus ruber), Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



Magnificent Frigatebird (Fregata magnificens), Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



Galapagos Flycatcher (Myiarchus magnirostris), Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



On the Camino de las Tortugas, Isabela



Medium Ground-Finch (Geospiza fortis), pic by Filip Colson

Day 6: Isabela: Las Tintoreras & a taste of the highlands

Today we signed up for an organised half-day excursion to ‘Las Tintoreras’, a set of islets in the bay of Puerto Villamil, a few minutes away by boat from the main dock. From the boat I spotted our first **Galapagos Penguins** – an amazing sight of a mythical species! Blue-footed Boobies, Brown Pelicans and **Brown Noddies** could be seen up close, while **American Whimbrels**, **Galapagos Oystercatchers** and a **Wandering Tattler** were foraging along the rocky shores. We then docked at Las Tintoreras Islet – where numerous **Galapagos Warblers** were present (including a fledgling which showed symptoms of *Philornis* infection <https://www.darwinfoundation.org/en/datazone/checklist?species=10067>). **Marine Iguanas** were everywhere on the islet, including on the rough ‘Aa’ lava fields. **Lava Gull**, **Lava Heron**, **Band-rumped Storm Petrels** and **Magnificent Frigatebirds** were also present. A group of **Galapagos**

Sea Lions could be observed at close range on a mangrove-fringed beach. And we spotted sleeping **White-tipped Reef Sharks** in a lava tunnel from above! After the guided islet walk, we went for spectacular snorkeling, among the reef sharks which were literally centimeters away. Many sea urchins, **Blue-fin Parrotfish** and starfish were present, and **Brown Noddies** were flying overhead. Back on the boat, we saw two large **Spotted Eagle Rays** up close. Overall, Las Tintoreras turned out to be one of the absolute wildlife highlights of the trip. After lunch, we were not sure about how and where to look for one of our highly sought-after target species, the **Little Vermillion Flycatcher** a.k.a. the *Pajaro Brujo*. We asked a cab driver if he could bring us to a place in the highlands where we could maybe see that species, and he told us he'd try. He drove us to the trailhead of the Volcan Chico and Sierra Negra trails, in the highlands. When arriving there, it was misty, and we were soon soaked by the cold drizzle. The vegetation looked promising – tall grass, some trees, ferns, and we started birding (with wet feet, as we were still dressed for the coastal birding & snorkeling.). We soon flushed a **Paint-billed Crake**, we could see its red legs dangling when it flew away and landed close by. **Green Warbler-Finches** were the most common species in the bushes. While we were really happy with the Crake, we were not very hopeful for the *pajaro brujo*...until I suddenly spotted a female, which was soon followed by a stunningly beautiful male **Little Vermillion Flycatcher**! The birds gave great views and we managed to get good pictures. At some point, the male even used one of the park rangers' motorcycle to rest. We truly enjoyed this observation, especially as we missed that species when looking for it at Los Gemelos in Santa Cruz a few days earlier. On the way back to town, we spotted **Cattle Egrets** and **Smooth-billed Anis** in the agricultural zone. We celebrated the day's sightings over a few beers at the Sunset Bar – while spotting passing **Lava Gulls**.



Galapagos Penguin (Spheniscus mendiculus), Las Tintoreras, Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



Brown Pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis urinator), Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



Blue-footed Booby (Sula nebouxii excisa), Las Tintoreras, Isabela pic by Filip Colson



Little Vermillion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus nanus), male, Isabela, pic by Filip Colson



Little Vermillion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus nanus), female, Isabela, pic by Filip Colson

Day 7: Isabela: Sierra Negra & Concha de Perla

As we had missed the departure of our planned excursion to Isla Tortuga (as we spent too much time on breakfast at the good ‘Las Gaviotas’ café...and enjoying an **American Flamingo** flying overhead), we had to change our plans and we decided to join a tour to the Sierra Negra volcano. This turned out to be a great, 15 kilometer-hike in a spectacular landscape along the caldera of the 1490 meter-high volcano. Along the trail, we spotted two **Little Vermilion Flycatchers**, many **Galapagos Mockingbirds**, **Green Warbler-finches**, **Galapagos Warblers** and **Small** and **Medium Ground-Finches**. The landscape was even more spectacular once we went to the northern slopes of the volcano, where we passed lava rock formations in all sizes and shapes, and where we had great views of Elisabeth Bay, Fernandina Island and the northern side of Isabela. Endemic *Jasminocereus thouarsii* candelabra cacti were common. While enjoying the view there, habituated **Small Ground-Finches** and **Galapagos Mockingbirds** were again very tame. Overall we did not see that many birds on the trip, but the hike and the landscape were very enjoyable,

despite heavy rain setting in towards the end of the hike. Back in the lowlands, the weather was much better and we headed back to the secluded ‘Concha de Perla’ bay in Puerto Villamil, where we enjoyed amazing snorkeling in a spectacularly beautiful setting. We had the chance to see **Whiptail Sting Rays, Spotted Eagle Rays, Bullseye Puffer, Black-nosed Butterfly Fish, Galapagos Gregory, Panamic Sergeant Major**, two unidentified starfish species and two, quietly feeding and very approachable **Pacific Green Turtles**. For an overview of Galapagos fish, see: <https://www.inaturalist.org/guides/9035>. **Blue-footed Boobies, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Lava Heron** were present while the soundscape was dominated by actively singing **Galapagos Warblers**. **Marine Iguanas** were plentiful, resting on the wooden trail and small dock. **Grey Plovers, Sanderlings** and **Ruddy Turnstones** were foraging along the beach further west.



Caldera of the Sierra Negra volcano, Isabela, pic by Jean Hugé



Grey Plover (Pluvialis squatarola cynosurae), Isabela, pic by Filip Colson

Day 8: Isla Tortuga & Isabela

We headed off early in the morning to take the boat to Tortuga Island, located a few kilometers off Puerto Villamil. We went on an organized snorkeling & diving tour (which turned out to actually be a tour for divers only), but we were thrilled by the opportunity to come close to a huge seabird colony. And indeed that's what Isla Tortuga is – one large, noisy, tropical seabird colony. It's a stunning sight to see the island covered with nesting, resting and displaying **Nazca Boobies, Great & Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Noddies, Swallow-tailed Gulls, Blue-footed Boobies, Red-billed Tropicbirds** and **Galapagos Shearwaters**. The shores of the steep rocky island are literally lined with many hundreds

(probably thousands!) of **Marine Iguanas** while **Galapagos Sea Lions** roam the area. Some were swimming right next to the boat. We spotted many **frigatebirds** with a fully inflated pouch – effectively creating red dots in the green-grey shrub which covers the island's gullies. A warning though, for those who are susceptible to sea-sickness – the sea was choppy and the boat quite unstable, so come prepared. We also quickly abandoned the idea of snorkeling off the island – heavy waves and poor visibility made the area unsuitable for snorkelling. However we would recommend a visit to the island for the birds-only, as the views were stunning. It was also the only place around Isabela where we could watch **Red-billed Tropicbirds** up-close – one of the long-awaited target species on my wish list! From the boat, we also watched an unidentified **Ground Finch** and a **Galapagos Warbler** on the island. **Band-rumped Storm Petrels**, **Galapagos Shearwaters** and the two boobies were the most common species during the crossing.

After landing back at Puerto Villamil we went for a beach walk towards the National Park, west of town. The seemingly endless stretch of sand was deserted except for a few groups of **Sanderlings**, **Grey Plovers**, **Ruddy Turnstones** and **American Whimbrels**. **Brown Pelicans** and **Blue-footed Boobies** flew along the coast while **Marine Iguanas** were common. As it started to rain we headed to the first floor of the by now-familiar Sunset Bar. From there we could spot the 'usual' (!) **Lava Gulls** and **Galapagos Sea Lions** while sipping from a fresh coconut. Despite still being somewhat soaked and cold, we decided to walk to the Concha de Perla – where we again enjoyed absolutely amazing snorkelling: a quietly feeding **Pacific Green Turtle**, and many fish -**Blue-barred Parrotfish**, **Bullseye Puffer**, **Cortez Rainbow Wrasse** and **Panamic Sergeant Major** among others- while **Lava Herons**, **Brown Noddies**, **Galapagos Warblers** and **Brown Pelicans** were flying overhead. For the first time this trip, we could swim centimeters away from a **Marine Iguana** which seemed totally unaffected by our presence.



Nazca Booby (Sula granti), pic by Filip Colson



Red-billed Tropicbird (Phaeton aethereus), pic by Filip Colson



Magnificent Frigatebird (Fregata magnificens), pic by Filip Colson



Swallow-tailed Gull (Creagrus furcatus), pic by Filip Colson

Day 9: Isabela & Santa Cruz

We left Isabela in the morning to head back to Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz. An **American Flamingo** flew over the Puerto Villamil jetty, the regular **Galapagos Sea Lions**, **Marine Iguanas**, **Brown Pelicans**, **frigatebirds**, **Ground-Finches** and **Galapagos Warblers** were present and we got great views of two **Royal Terns**, scarce boreal migrants on the Galapagos. The crossing was much calmer than a few days ago. At sea, we saw many **Galapagos Shearwaters** and **Galapagos Petrels**, **Nazca** and **Blue-footed Boobies**, **White-Vented** and **Band-rumped Storm-petrels** and a few **Galapagos Sea Lions**. Approaching Santa Cruz we spotted a **Pacific Green Turtle**. In Santa Cruz, I spent most of the day in work meetings, including a meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture on the outskirts of Puerto Ayora where I was surprised to see a wild **Galapagos Giant Tortoise** (*Chelonoides porteri*) wandering around the small garden.



Royal Tern (Thalasseus maximus), pic by Filip Colson

Day 10: Guayaquil

I left Puerto Villamil in the morning and took a taxi to the Baltra dock, to cross Itabaca Channel to Baltra Island, where the airport is located. In and around the airport, I had the chance to see three more **Land Iguanas**, many **Small Ground-Finches**, two tame **Galapagos Doves**, courting and fighting **Lava Lizards** and...my last Galapagos endemic of the trip: a **Galapagos Short-eared Owl** which flew by! I took the plane to Guayaquil, where I took a taxi from the airport to the Iguanazu hotel <https://iguanazu.com/>, a little green oasis in the 'Ciudadella Paraiso' neighbourhood, set against the backdrop of a jungle-clad hill with great views over the city of Guayaquil. I chose this place because of its ideal location, half way between the airport and the Cerro Blanco reserve where I would go birding the next day. The hotel has a garden and is a great place to watch birds. **Yellow-rumped Caciques**, **Grey-breasted Martins**, **Scrub Blackbirds** and **Saffron Finches** were among the most common birds. Large 'kettles' of **Black Vulture** and **Turkey Vulture** were soaring overhead while noisy groups of **Pacific Parrotlets** were quite difficult to spot. Two **Pale-legged Horneros** were foraging in the garden. A lone **Common Black Hawk** flew over. A **Boat-billed Flycatcher** was –indeed– catching flies from a nearby fence, while I heard **Amazilia Hummingbird** but could not spot any. Other notable species included **Croaking Ground Dove** (which I had seen in Quito at the start of the trip), **Magnificent Frigatebirds** circling above the city, **Eared Doves**, **Shiny Cowbirds**, **Blue-and-white Swallows** and **Blue-Grey Tanagers**. **Cattle Egrets** and a lone **Great Egret** flew over. Overall, these few hours spent birding, working and resting in the Iguanazu garden was a great introduction to birding in Ecuador's coastal region – yet I could not imagine how overwhelming the birding would be the next day.

Day 11: Cerro Blanco & its Tumbes specialities

I had arranged a guided visit beforehand, through the Cerro Blanco Reserve managers <https://bosquecerroblanco.org/>. The private Cerro Blanco Reserve covers an area of 6000 hectares in the southeastern part of the Chongon-Colonche mountain range. It's a key area for many so-called Tumbes endemics and it is covered in deciduous and semi-deciduous forests (which were green and rainy during my visit in April). I was guided by the excellent birder Daniel Lopez Condoy (+593 95 888 0476). During our visit, which started around 7 AM and lasted till around 2.30 PM, we walked, listened and watched for birds intensely, and the lush vegetation and sometimes heavy rain, made it quite challenging to identify some species quickly. Without a knowledgeable guide I would have missed many species – the private tour was definitely worth the investment. The Cerro Blanco managers also arranged a taxi to pick me up, then drive me back to Iguanazu Hotel for a quick shower before dropping me at Guayaquil Airport where I took my flight to Amsterdam in the evening. We ticked 57 species in Cerro Blanco, of which 37 were lifers to me! I refer to ebird for my full checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S115171446>. **Ecuadorian Thrush, Chivi Vireo, Yellow-rumped Cacique and White-browed Gnatcatcher** were the most common species. We spotted three species of parrots (**Grey-cheeked and Red-masked Parakeet and Pacific Parrotlet**), no less than five species of wren (**House Wren, Speckle-breasted Wren, Superciliated Wren & Fasciated Wren** – the latter had a nest in one of the viewing platforms). Notable (near-)endemics included **Ecuadorian Piculet, Rufous-headed Chachalaca, Ecuadorian Ground Dove, Plumbeous-backed Thrush and Black-capped Sparrow**. When the rain stopped and the afternoon heat was creating good conditions for thermals, we spent some time watching raptors from one of the viewing platforms: while **Black and Turkey Vulture** were the most numerous species, we also spotted five **Swallow-tailed Kites** and a **Zone-tailed Hawk**. On the mammal front I managed to see three **Central American Agoutis** and a **Guayaquil Squirrel**. This was just a small sample of the mammal diversity of Cerro Blanco, as there are recent documented sightings of Jaguar (Saavedra et al., 2017: <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/56151>). This great birding day at Cerro Blanco gave me a taste of the high biodiversity of the Tumbes-region. At Guayaquil International Airport I watched birds from the terminal, looking out over the grasslands and tracks: I spotted the last lifer of the trip for me: at last, a **Crested Caracara**! Other notable species included **Zone-tailed Hawk, Harris's Hawk and American Kestrel**.



Me & Daniel Lopez, bird guide at Cerro Blanco



Cerro Blanco forest in the rain



Central American Agouti (Dasyprocta punctata), Cerro Blanco

Literature & podcast

- The Galapagos – A Natural History, by Henry Nichols (2015, Profile Books), an excellent and well-written introduction to get a clear view of the 'bigger picture' while in Galapagos. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18330539-the-gal-pagos>
- Galapagos Wildlife, by David Horwell & Pete Oxford (2011, Bradt Travel Guides) – we only used the third edition, but there is a 4th edition out. <https://www.bradtguides.com/product/galapagos-wildlife-4/>
- Birds & Mammals of the Galapagos, by Dusan M. Brinkhuizen & Jonas Nilsson (2020, Lynx & BirdLife International Field Guides) – this book was excellent, comprehensive, well-documented and brand new, a must-have for any naturalist traveling to the Galapagos. <https://www.lynxeds.com/product/birds-and-mammals-of-the-galapagos/>

- Birds of Ecuador, by Juan Freile & Robin Restall (2018, Helm Field Guides).
<https://www.nhbs.com/birds-of-ecuador-book>
- For an excellent introduction of the recent ecological history of the Galapagos islands, check this RadioLab podcast: <https://radiolab.org/episodes/galapagos>

Trip Species List

A. Puenbo (Quito) bird list

Croaking Ground Dove
Eared Dove
Sparkling Violetear
Western Emerald
Rufous-tailed Hummingbird
Turkey Vulture
American Kestrel
Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet
Vermilion Flycatcher
Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant
Blue-and-white Swallow
Tropical Mockingbird
Great Thrush
Hooded Siskin
Shiny Cowbird
Golden Grosbeak
Blue-and-yellow Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Scrub Tanager
Cinereous Conebill
Saffron Finch
Black-and-white Seedeater

B. Galapagos bird list

Galapagos Pintail
American Flamingo
Red-billed Tropicbird
Galapagos Dove
Smooth-billed Ani
Galapagos Rail
Paint-billed Crake
Common Gallinule
Galapagos Penguin
White-vented Storm Petrel
Band-rumped Storm Petrel
Galapagos Petrel

Galapagos Shearwater
Yellow-crowned Night Heron
Lava Heron
Western Cattle Egret
Great Blue Heron
American Great Egret
Brown Pelican
Magnificent Frigatebird
Great Frigatebird
Blue-footed Booby
Nazca Booby
Galapagos Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
Grey Plover
Sanderling
American (Hudsonian) Whimbrel
Ruddy Turnstone
Spotted Sandpiper
Wandering Tattler
Brown Noddy
Swallow-tailed Gull
Lava Gull
Royal Tern
Galapagos Short-eared Owl
Galapagos Flycatcher
Little Vermilion Flycatcher
Galapagos Mockingbird
Galapagos Warbler
Green Warbler-finch
Vegetarian Finch
Small Tree-finch
Woodpecker Finch
Small Ground-Finch
Medium Ground-Finch

Large Ground-Finch

Common Cactus-finch

C. Cerro Blanco (Guayaquil) bird list

Rufous-beaded Chachalaca

Pale-vented Pigeon

Ecuadorian Ground Dove

Blue Ground Dove

White-tipped Dove

Groove-billed Ani

Squirrel Cuckoo

Gray-capped Cuckoo

Short-tailed Swift

Amazilia Hummingbird

Magnificent Frigatebird

Great Egret

Cattle Egret

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Swallow-tailed Kite

Zone-tailed Hawk

Gartered Trogon

Ecuadorian Piculet

Scarlet-backed Woodpecker

Golden-olive Woodpecker

Laughing Falcon

Gray-cheeked Parakeet

Pacific Parrotlet

Red-masked Parakeet

Plain Antvireo

Streak-headed Woodcreeper

One-colored Becard

Yellow-olive Flycatcher

Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet

Sooty-beaded Tyrannulet

Boat-billed Flycatcher

Social Flycatcher

Streaked Flycatcher

Tropical Kingbird

Chivi Vireo

Gray-breasted Martin

White-browed Gnatcatcher

House Wren

Fasciated Wren

Speckle-breasted Wren

Superciliated Wren

Ecuadorian Thrush

Plumbeous-backed Thrush

Thick-billed Euphonia

Black-capped Sparrow

Yellow-rumped Cacique

Yellow-tailed Oriole

Shiny Cowbird

Giant Cowbird
Scrub Blackbird
Tropical Parula
Gray-and-gold Warbler
Golden Grosbeak
Blue-gray Tanager
Saffron Finch
Streaked Saltator

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