



Great Thrush © Kevin Loughlin



Sword-billed Hummer © Kevin Loughlin



Giant Tortoises © Kevin Loughlin

NJ AUDUBON GALAPAGOS TRIP REPORT

Leaders: Dale Rosselet, Kevin Karlson & Kevin Loughlin

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Red-billed Tropicbird © Kevin Loughlin

Sixteen of us embarked on a great adventure, sponsored by NJ Audubon and organized by Wildside Nature Tours. While the Galapagos Islands dangled out there in our near future, we couldn't pass up exploring a little of the high elevation habitats around Quito. The gardens around our hotel gave us the chance to start looking at common birds...although Great Thrush, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Yellow-billed Pintail can hardly be called common!!

Where can you see a Blackburnian Warbler, an Oleanginous Hemispingus and a Sword-billed Hummingbird? Guango Lodge! In fact, we saw a dozen species of hummingbirds at this gem of the Ecuadorian cloud forest!

The 90-minute drive was worth every second—from the moment we jumped off the bus to walk through the garden full of feeders, a-buzz with the tiny, glittering jewels with names like Tourmaline Sunangel, Tyrian Metaltail and Glowing Puffleg. The Long-tailed Sylph was certainly one of the stars of the day! No matter where we turned there were incredible looks at birds, and watching the Yellow-rumped Caciques building their long pendulum-shaped nests over the trail was certainly a sight to see.

The flights to the Galapagos the following day were uneventful... just as we'd hoped. Upon landing we gathered our gear and boarded our bus to the pier, where we were greeted by dozens of Blue-footed Boobies, a plethora of Brown Noddies and our first looks at Sea Lions and Land Iguanas. What a wonderful welcome!

After lunch we boarded the zodiacs and motored to our first landing, on Santa Cruz and were whisked to the highlands to enjoy the huge Giant Tortoises wallowing in the mud! Along the way we stopped in the Scalesia Forest and found some of the less common finches... Woodpecker, Small Tree and Vegetarian Finches. We



Waved Albatross © Kevin Loughlin



Sally Lightfoot Crab © Kevin Loughlin



Short-eared Owl © Kevin Loughlin

also enjoyed our first Yellow (Mangrove) Warblers and a lot of Small and Medium Ground Finches as well!

Genovesa, known as "The Bird Island" did not disappoint! Our morning landing offered Nazca Boobies, Red-footed Boobies, Great Frigatebirds, Swallow-tailed Gulls, Lava Herons and Red-billed Tropicbirds as well as new finches... Sharp-beaked, Large Cactus, Large Ground and both Gray and Green Warbler Finches.

After an afternoon zodiac ride we climbed Prince Philip's Stairs to the plateau and soon found our top target species, a Galapagos Short-eared Owl, close to the trail! We found more owls as the sun dropped in the sky, while enjoying huge numbers of seabirds overhead!

Plaza Sur (South Plaza Island) greeted us with many Land Iguanas and the very rare Hybrid Land x Marine Iguana! A mama sea lion was giving birth in the rocks below our landing... it was difficult watching her struggle with a breach-birth... the newborn's flippers coming out first, so we continued on to the top of the island to enjoy the sea bird show! Pelicans, frigatebirds, tropicbirds and lots of Galapagos Shearwaters zoomed by as we clicked off frame after frame, trying to capture the perfect image! Upon our return to the landing, we found that the young sea lion had been born and was learning how to suckle! A wonderful end to our time on Plaza Sur!

Santa Fe offered a fun snorkel with lots of fish, including sharks! Our walk on the island was quiet, but full of more Land Iguanas, the variety endemic to this island. More sea lions greeted us on the beach as we enjoyed the glow of the setting sun.

What a rock! Whether you see the 'sleeping lion' or the 'boot', Leon Dormido, aka Kicker Rock, is a magnificent sight! While some snorkeled through a passage in the rock and enjoyed swimming with Green Sea Turtles, sea lions, sharks and many colorful fish, another small group circled the rock in the zodiac and got great up-close looks at Brown Noddies!

Our first landing on San Cristobal, at Cerro Brujo (Wizard Hill) gave us Ghost Crabs, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Sanderlings and a Great Blue Heron! Later in the day we drove across the island to Cerro Colorado and the Giant Tortoise breeding center. Loaded with Poison Apple Trees (don't touch!) and the endemic San Cristobal (Chatham) Mockingbird, the breeding center offered the 'intermediary' variety of tortoise... between the dome and saddle-back shaped carapaces.

Kevin's favorite island, Española, did not disappoint! Our morning landing at Gardner Bay immediately gave us the endemic Hood Mockingbird, begging for water! It was a pleasant morning walking along the surf looking for all that was new!

However, the afternoon walk was the highlight of the tour for most of us... especially the Waved Albatross doing their courtship performance! From the first footsteps on the beach, full of huge Marine Iguanas, cooperative (and feisty) oystercatchers and a bathing Yellow-crowned Night Heron, the action was nearly non-stop.



Hieroglyphic Hawkfish © Kevin Loughlin



Santiago Lava Field © Kevin Loughlin



Galapagos Penguin © Kevin Loughlin

The walk to get to the albatross breeding area was slow and difficult—lava rocks do not offer a level surface—however, the first Waved Albatross we happened upon made every mis-step worthwhile! We went on to enjoy several courtship dances, a few airport lift-offs and lots of fly-bys!

The walk continued, passing the beautiful blow-hole and winding through more nesting albatrosses before dropping down into the Nazca Booby nesting area. However, the sun was going down quickly and we continued on to find the few nesting Blue-footed Boobies near the end of the trail. What an incredible day on the island of Española!

Flamingos! More than twenty flamingos were in the hyper-saline pool on Floreana, along with a number of peeps, including Wilson's Phalaropes! We walked to Flour Beach, on the other side of the island, to wade the waters with the sting rays. They were not too plentiful, but still exciting to see when they tumbled by in the surf. From here we could see our next destination, Champion Island, where from zodiacs we found the extremely endangered Charles Mockingbird which had been extirpated from Floreana, taking residence on the smaller islands of Champion and Gardner.

After an afternoon visit to Post Office Bay, where we got our first glimpses of Galapagos Penguins before leaving our post cards in the barrel, we did a sunset zodiac ride enjoying great scenery and more birds!

Penguins! More Penguins! The shores of Bartolome and Santiago are home to a fair number of Galapagos Penguins, and they did not disappoint us! Offering a little show of preening and bathing, an adult and a juvenile penguin swam around our zodiacs offering some great photo opportunities. A slippery disembark onto Santiago's lava field gave us infinite photo opps. The patterns in the lava revealed cartoon characters to some, monsters to others!

After more than 370 steps our group made it to the top of a blustery Bartolome Island to look out over the scene that includes the iconic Pinnacle Rock, as the sun set. A fitting last night in the Galapagos

Our final morning in the islands took us to Black Turtle Cove. Surrounded by mangroves and rocks, we enjoyed many Blue-footed Boobies and found an unusual visiting Laughing Gull. In the densest mangroves, the shallow waters allowed wonderful sightings of rays, sharks and sea turtles. A wonderful end to our adventure to carry us through our flights to Quito and then, after a farewell dinner and rest, back home again.

While this short summary of our trip does just that...summarizes some of the group adventures, each of us walked away with our own highlights, memories and special moments. On behalf of NJ Audubon and Wildside Nature Tours, we hope that your trip was as amazing as it was to us.

Trip Report by Dale Rosselet, NJ Audubon

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