

The Galapagos:

BIRD HAVEN

by Val Clear, Ph.D.
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The remarkable discoveries made by Charles Darwin on the Galapagos Islands are now reviewed by a new generation of hardy bird-watchers who trace his steps. No place for the typical tourist, the Galapagos Islands reward rugged adventurers with an ornithologist's paradise. Because of centuries of isolation and strict control by Ecuadorian government, many birds are almost as tame as a pet budgie, and all the usual activities of birds are undisturbed by the presence of human visitors.

The Galapagos Islands are located on the equator, about 700 miles due west of South America. There are around twenty islands in the archipelago, only a few of them with human inhabitants. Because of their isolation for millenia, the wildlife has developed into rare and interesting forms, including unique flora, mammals, reptiles, insect and marine life. It was this isolation that provided the foundation for Darwin's great insight, *The Origin of Species*. After more than a century, it is still widely read. He noted that there were thirteen species of finches that had apparently developed from a single source, adapting in each case to a different environment. He concluded that the best adapted individuals were able most successfully to reproduce themselves, hence the next generation was the outcome of only the individuals well suited to changing conditions, and this in time produced distinct species. The survival of the fittest, he called it.

These finches can still be seen on the islands. More detailed treatment of them will appear in a subsequent *Watchbird* article.

The assortment of birds extant on the islands is formidable—one hundred thirty-eight species sighted in thirty-eight genera, ranging from a tiny finch to a six-foot-span Albatross. Although most are indigenous and many are unique, there are a few

species that range elsewhere, as well. My first vermilion flycatcher I saw on Fernandina Island, but the species ranges from southwestern United States to Chile.

Researchers are still exploring the finches. Would Darwin's contemporaries have believed him if he had reported a vampire finch? It was not known until 1963 that the sharp-beaked ground finch (*Geospiza difficilis*) feeds on drops of blood extracted from moulting feathers of the boobies and other larger birds.

Each human visitor brings a different set of expectations, but few are not fulfilled by the broad spread of bird life. Being islands, seabirds dominate the scene, from the unbelievably anthropomorphic penguins—like little bell-hops awaiting your pleasure—to the displaying frigate bird males, with inflated ruby-throated pouches the size of a large grapefruit.

There is never a moment when there is not a bird in sight. There will be an albatross, a frigate bird or a swallow-tailed gull playing the air currents aloft, a red-footed or blue-footed booby sitting on the shore, a pelican skimming the waves, a smaller bird working the shrubs ashore, a hawk soaring above the landscape, or a mockingbird delivering his familiar aria from a tree top. Flightless cormorants and doves are common, and with reasonably good timing the visitor encounters herons, egrets, oystercatchers, gallinules, cuckoos, tropic birds, and several other finches.

The Galapagos ("Gah-LAH-pah-gose") Islands constitute an extremely carefully controlled national park of Ecuador. No one is permitted to set foot ashore without an accompanying licensed guide. These guides are well trained naturalists who take a course of preparation and have to pass re-examinations periodically. They come from various nations and speak numerous languages. The guide for my

group was Bill Hendricks, from Seattle, and the companion group had a multilingual Belgian, Michel Kaisin.

To serve the public, the Ecuadorian government permits various tour operators to schedule groups to visit the Galapagos. Normally, this means that the group lives aboard a ship, cruises from island to island and goes ashore. The islands have not been "improved" to fit tourists' convenience. A "wet landing" means that you get out of a small boat and wade ashore. A "dry landing" may involve leaping from a pitching lifeboat onto a rocky ledge. On one island we had to crawl cautiously along a path ten inches wide carved into a stone cliff.

Once on the island, paths are marked by stakes and no one is permitted to stray. The environment is extremely fragile and every precaution is taken to avoid tampering. Each visitor is given a plastic sack to hang around the neck, and all debris (film boxes, Kleenex, etc.) must be returned to the ship. No smoking is permitted, so wildlife will not fear fires nor will they swallow filters. Before returning to the lifeboat, shoes are rinsed in the ocean to avoid carrying contamination from island to island.

Although birds have been the focus of this article, there are fascinating crustaceans, reptiles, and mammals to be seen also. Surely the most colorful crabs in the world speckle the black rocks along the waterline. Iguanas are common, and on some sunny banks will number scores of thousands. Sea lions are in every cove. All wildlife is perfectly fearless. For conservation reasons, touching wildlife is a no-no, but the wildlife do not know this and would permit it. A close-up portrait of a calm sea lion and her pup at a distance of three feet is simple to manage.

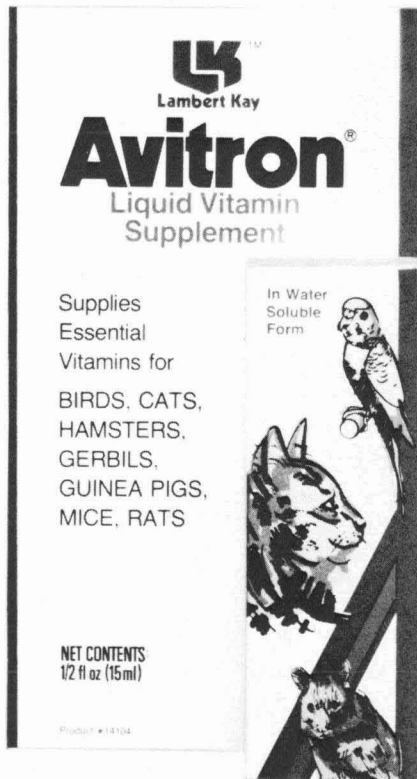
To an exotic-aviculturist, the experience is a rare venture in the joys of aviculture combined with the rewards of nature in its most free state. I have been trying (without success) to breed a Peruvian species similar to the *Geospizinae* of the Galapagos. It was a thrill and a revelation to encounter their global nests with underside entrance in the wild, and I came home with ideas as to how to encourage nest building.

Because there are almost no natural enemies on the islands and human beings have rarely visited, the birds welcome visitors. Fearless, they go about everyday activities unabashedly.

Our group of twenty observed a pair of blue-footed boobies throughout

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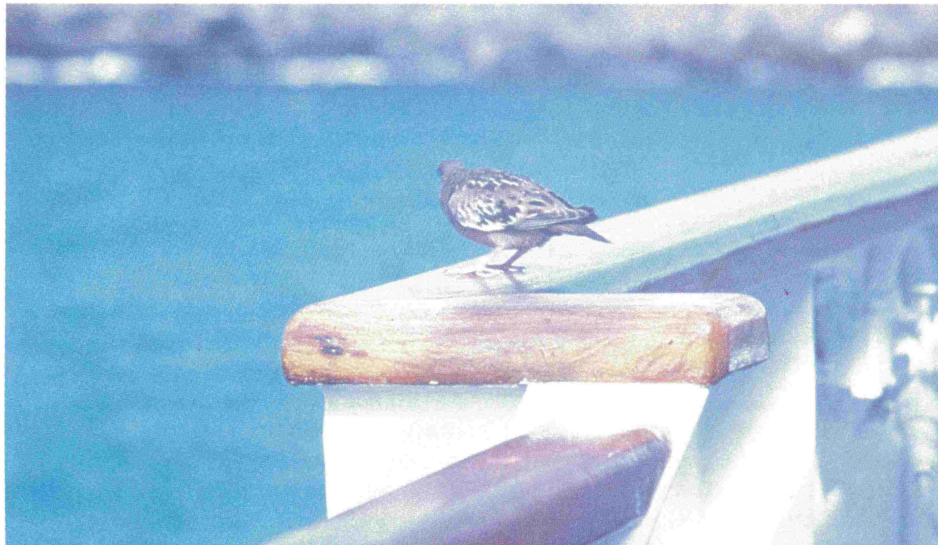
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Tame Darwin's finch inside the airport.



Blue-footed booby (*Sula nebouxii*)

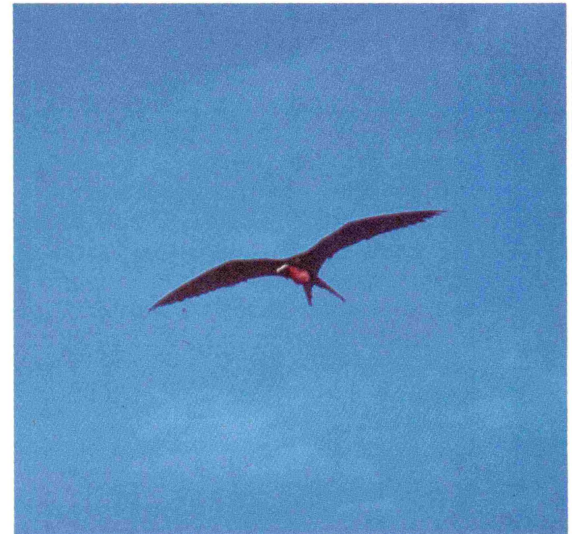


Galapagos dove on ship railing (*Zenaida galapagoensis*)

their courtship dance to its completion, standing on the shore about fifteen feet away. We watched a Galapagos hawk one afternoon as he played the air currents high in the sky overhead, then he spiraled down to a mountain crag, where we took his picture silhouetted against a blue sky. Wanting a better look at us, he soared down to a tree branch about twenty feet overhead and posed for close-ups. My first morning at the islands was an introduction; as I was walking on the top deck a dove flew in, landed on the rail and looked me over as carefully as I studied him. I think I could have caught him more easily than I do my "tame" ones at home.

Because they are *naturalist* guides, the exposure a visitor gets is quite different from anywhere else in the traveler's world. They maximize the encounter with nature. Always cautious to preserve nature as it is, they draw careful lines as to what is and what is not permitted, but within prescribed limits, they create beautiful memories.

Photo by Karl Glander



Great frigate bird (*Fregata minor*)

The guides know where on each island to find the birds on display. There are rookeries of frigate birds and boobies, with fuzzy white babies so close they fill the camera lens. There are unusually clearly defined territories, so that on occasion a guide may predict that a certain species will be seen just over the crest of the hill.

Some of the birds can be found only by boat. There is a colony of tropicbirds nesting like our swallows in cups plastered to the protected walls of overhanging cliffs. Penguins stand as sentinels along the rocky banks, but show no alarm at the human invasion.

Photo by Val Clear



Masked booby (*Sula dactylatra*)

I was determined to get a good picture of one of Darwin's finches, so one day I sat alone on a rock on the beach to let one of them look me over. He did. He was searching for insect life and worked his way to between my feet. I must have shot a roll of film! But his camouflage is so good that I have to point out which of the shadows is the bird.

Most of the birds, however, are not so obscurely patterned. If you know any of the North American mocking-birds, you would know the Galapagos form. There is a yellow warbler as frantic and as musical as any in Michigan. The beaches have a steady flow of petrels, shearwaters and oystercatchers, but these are more active than the land birds, and tend to move on more quickly.

Everywhere there are swallow-tailed gulls and lava gulls, friendly and sociable. Not quite as common are the herons, rails and crakes, but a sharp-eyed guide knows where to find them.

Aside from the penguins, the most unusual of the birds are the flightless cormorants. These birds, which swim and feed deep in the ocean waters, are incapable of flying. Their wings are vestigial, with meager primary feathers. They are shaped a bit like a loon but walk more upright when on land. These cormorants are gregarious and flocks are sizeable.

If you are there at the right season of the year, there are over thirty species of migratory birds that are commonly reported, including osprey, peregrine, phalarope, kingfisher, martin, swallow, and bobolink.

Reflecting on the visit to the Galapagos, I ask myself what is so different from the usual birding expedition such as is offered in Guatemala or Kenya. I think the key to its delight is the unspoiled state of nature. All the wildlife trusts the visitors. The guides caution you not to yield to the temptation to pet the sea lion that seems to beg to be stroked. Birds are completely trusting—the kind of trust we work hard at producing in a hand-fed yellow-naped, and pay an extra \$200 to get. Standing on an island, surrounded by fellow visitors who share your love for nature and led by a naturalist whose life is devoted to protecting it, you have a feeling that this is the way the world ought to be. Nuclear reactors and star wars never enter your mind in that setting of nature at its best.

There are a number of published sources to be studied before going to the islands. The definitive work is Barry Kent MacKay, *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Galapagos* (Collins, St. James's Place, London, revised 1982, 159 pp.). The best scholarly book on the finches is David Lack, *Darwin's Finches* (Cambridge University Press, New York, revised 1983, 208 pp.). *National Geographic* has carried several articles, the most complete being the Roger Tory Peterson report in the April, 1967, issue.

It is hard to imagine a more satisfying way of observing wild birds than the Galapagos trip. Numerous opportunities are offered in the pages of *Audubon Magazine* or *Bird Watchers Digest*. It is not cheap considering distances and ways to travel to get there are large. But dollar for dollar, it is a rewarding venture. ●

Photo by Karl Glander



Swallow-tailed gulls (*Creagrus furcatus*)
Booby chick



Photo by Val Clear