

Ecuador and Galápagos: November 23-December 5 2006

I participated in the trip as guest lecturer on a tour arranged by Klein Tours for alumni of the University of Bristol. Dr Marc Holderied shared lecturing duties with me. It was remarkable talking about microevolution, with Daphne Major in the background, and about adaptive radiation in Tagus cove, where Darwin landed on Isabela 171 years ago!

I travelled fairly lightly by my standards with Nikon D100 and D2X SLRs, a 18-70mm and 80-400mm VR zoom lenses, a 55mm macro lens, and lightweight 8x32mm Leitz binoculars. I barely used the D100, except in Quito with fill-in flash, and the lenses did everything I wanted. The 80-400mm even survived a drop, buffered by landing on my big toe (which bled profusely!) The most useful guide books were volume 2 of Ridgely & Greenfield's 'The Birds of Ecuador' and Fitter *et al.*'s 'Wildlife of the Galápagos'. Recent changes to nomenclature include the split of Galápagos shearwater *Puffinus subalaris* from Audubon's shearwater *P. lherminieri* and the split of Galápagos sea lion *Zalophus wolfebacki* from the California sea lion *Z. californicus*.

We flew from London Heathrow to Madrid, then on to Quito, with Iberia. We arrived in Quito at about 17.00h on 23 November, and stayed at the Patio Andaluz hotel in the San Francisco area. We saw **eared doves** and **great thrushes** on our way to the hotel.

24 November

Up at first light to go birding in the local parks. First visited Parque Alameda where we saw **great thrushes**, **eared doves**, and **rufous-collared sparrows**, birds that were all widespread in the city. **American kestrel** here also. Parque el Ejido was better, and included **sparkling violetear** hummingbirds. We then went on a city tour, mainly around the Independencia Square, where we saw **white-collared swifts** overhead, and fringed noctuid moths everywhere. Returning to the parks in the late afternoon, we found **vermillion flycatchers**, a juvenile **Harris's hawk**, and **black-tailed trainbearers**. **Feral pigeons** are everywhere.

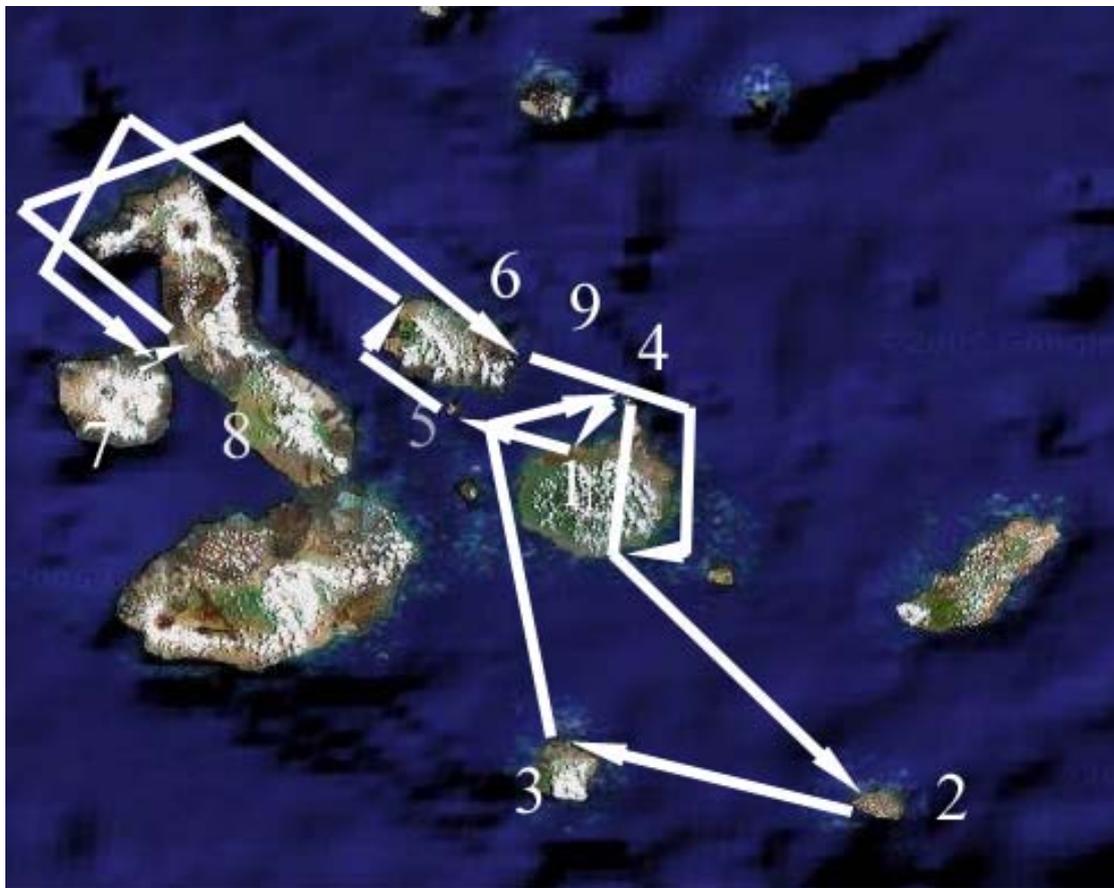
25 November

An early morning visit to Independencia Square produced **brown-bellied swallows** and **black-tailed trainbearer**. We took the Trans America highway to Otavalo, seeing **blue and white swallows** and **cattle egrets** en route. At the equator we saw **hooded siskin**, **cinereous conebill**, and **ash-breasted sierra finch**. At Cuicocha Lake we saw 3 **silvery grebes**, **Andean coot**, **Andean ruddy duck**, **scarlet-bellied mountain tanager**, **blue-black grassquit**, with some of the group seeing a giant hummingbird. In Cotacachi there was a **moss-backed tanager** and **sparkling violetears**. At a nearby hacienda we saw southern **yellow grosbeaks** and **streak-necked flycatcher**.

26 November

We flew from Quito to Baltra in Galápagos. We stopped off at Guayaquil en route, and saw a **Harris's hawk** and **cattle egrets** on descent. The first birds I saw on

Galápagos were flying **Galápagos doves** at Baltra airport. Also here were **small** and **medium ground finches**, and a land iguana. We crossed the Itabaca canal to reach Santa Cruz and were overwhelmed by the birdlife. We saw a **laughing gull**, **magnificent frigatebirds**; **brown noddies** perched on **brown pelicans**, **Galápagos shearwater**, **blue-footed booby**, **lava heron** and **lava gull**. As we crossed Santa Cruz to reach Puerto Ayora we saw **smooth-billed anis**, **cattle egret** and **Galápagos dove**. At Puerto Ayora harbour there were 2 **wandering tattlers**, **ruddy turnstone**, **great blue heron**, **lava heron** and **lava gull**. **Elliot's storm petrels** fed offshore. Marine iguanas, sally lightfoot crabs and Galápagos sea lions were everywhere. In the afternoon we visited the Charles Darwin Research Station seeing **yellow warbler**, **Galápagos mockingbirds**, **Galápagos flycatcher**, **smooth-billed anis**, **small**, **medium** and **large ground finches**, and **cactus finch**. We also saw the Galápagos blue butterfly. At the centre we saw the last Pinta giant tortoise, Lonesome George. That night we sailed towards Española aboard the Coral II.



Our route: 1 – Santa Cruz; 2- Española; 3 – Floreana; 4 – Seymour; 5 – Rabida; 6 – Santiago; 7 – Fernandina; 8 – Isabela; 9 – Bartolomé.

27 November

We awoke moored off Punta Suárez in Española. Española is the easternmost and oldest of the islands in the archipelago. From the boat, we saw **Elliot's storm petrels**, **1 wedge-rumped storm petrel**, **1+ Madeiran (band-rumped) storm petrel**, **red-billed tropic birds**, **Galápagos shearwaters**, **waved albatrosses**, **brown pelicans**,

blue-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, magnificent frigatebirds, lava heron and a **swallow-tailed gull** that landed on the boat.

First stop was Punta Suárez. There were breeding **red-billed tropic birds, waved albatrosses** (displaying), **blue-footed boobies** (displaying), **Nazca boobies** and **swallow-tailed gulls**. Other birds included **cattle egret**, a juvenile **yellow-crowned night heron**, 2 **wandering tattlers**, **hood mockingbirds**, **yellow warblers**, **small ground finches**, 2 **warbler finches** and 2 male **large cactus finches**. A juvenile Galápagos **hawk** was near an old nest, and an adult fed on sea lion placenta. We also saw red marine iguanas, the Española lava lizard, and Galápagos sea lions with pups.

At least 3 green turtles swam past the boat over lunch, and in the afternoon we landed at Gardner Bay. The sea lions here were very photogenic. Birds included an adult **yellow-crowned night heron**, **Galápagos flycatcher**, **yellow warbler**, **Galápagos hawk**, **wandering tattler**, **hood mockingbirds**, a **warbler finch** and a **large cactus finch**.

28 November

We had a rough overnight crossing from Española to Floreana. Our lifejackets fell off the walls, and several people were thrown off their feet or out of their beds in the cabins. This was the only night when we experienced substantial roll motion during the cruise. We awoke moored off Punta Cormorán on Floreana. Ashore we saw **greater flamingos**, **white-checked pintails**, 10+ **Franklin's gulls**, **Hudsonian whimbrel**, **least sandpiper**, **western sandpiper**, **semipalmated sandpiper**, **semipalmated plovers**, 2 **black-necked stilts**, and a **Galápagos flycatcher**. There was a **sanderling** on the beach.

In the afternoon we visited Post Office Bay and Mirador de la Baronesa. An exhausted green turtle was on the beach, later drifting out to sea. I saw a **black-bellied plover**, and others in the group saw a distant **Galápagos penguin**. Other birds included a **great blue heron** and **lava heron**. We found a dead green hawkmoth at the lava cave above Post Office Bay, and dragonflies and monarch butterflies were widespread. Sting rays lay under the water on the beach. In the evening we saw some distant dolphins leaping, and the phosphorescence was impressive from the boat at night.

29 November

We awoke off Seymour. This is an important breeding site for frigatebirds, and most of those present were **magnificent frigatebirds** - we saw few **great frigatebirds**. **Swallow-tailed gulls** were also common, and we saw one bird with an egg. Other birds included 1 **lava gull**, **blue-footed boobies**, **brown noddy** and a **sanderling**. Breeding success in the blue-footed boobies seemed very low – we only saw one youngster during our stay – and the guides said that breeding had been limited for a few years now. We also saw land iguana here.

We had a chance to visit Baltra beach while the boat was refuelling. I had my first close views of a **Galápagos dove** here, and there were great opportunities to photograph feeding flocks of **brown noddies** and **brown pelicans**. We later took a

panga ride around the mangrove inlets at Venice on the north coast of Santa Cruz. Here we saw **lava heron** and **wandering tattler**. In the water we drifted past spotted eagle rays, white-tipped reef sharks and mating green turtles.

We walked up Dragon Hill on Santa Cruz. A lagoon here held **black-necked stilt**, 2 **Wilson's phalaropes**, c5 **least sandpipers**, 2 **semipalmated plovers**, **Hudsonian whimbrel**, and a **greater flamingo**. We also saw a **small tree finch**, **large ground finches**, **cactus finch**, a possible **vegetarian finch**, **Galápagos mockingbirds**, and **Galápagos flycatcher**. Several land iguanas were noted, and we saw our first feral goat.

30 November

In the morning we saw large numbers of phalaropes between Santa Cruz and Rabida. Both **red-necked** and **grey phalaropes** seem to be present. We also saw a **dark-rumped petrel** and a manta ray.

On Rabida we saw a **Galápagos hawk**, **Galápagos dove**, 2 **American Oystercatchers**, a **lava heron** and a **Galápagos penguin** along the rocky coast. There were a couple of Galápagos fur seals hauled out on the rocks, and on the red sand beach we saw a mother sea lion picking up a newborn pup by the scruff of its neck, and carrying it away from the beachmaster.

On the crossing to Santiago we saw many **dark-rumped petrels**, and a feeding frenzy of seabirds including **brown noddies** and **Galápagos shearwaters**. A shoal of fish resembling tuna swam past. At Santiago we visited Puerto Egas. The **Galápagos hawks** here were very approachable: we saw 2 adults and a juvenile. We watched the fur seals in the grottos, and waders included a **wandering tattler**, **Hudsonian whimbrel**, a **semipalmated plover** and ca.5 **sanderling**. In the evening we watched a **swallow-tailed gull** following the boat in darkness.

1 December

Morning saw us moored off Fernandina, the youngest and most westerly of the main islands. **Flightless cormorants** and **Galápagos penguins** swam off the boat. We also saw 3 **Hudsonian whimbrel** and several green turtles. We took a panga ride along the coast, seeing one only two **striated herons** that I saw in Galápagos. Fish life included a group of golden rays, and spotted eagle rays.

We disembarked at Punta Espinosa and walked over the lava fields. We returned through the **flightless cormorant** colony, seeing a **wandering tattler**, **American oystercatcher**, and a **Galápagos hawk**. In the Bolivar channel we saw thousands of phalaropes, including many **grey phalaropes**. Other seabirds included many **Galápagos shearwaters** and 2 **band-rumped petrels**. A single bottle-nosed dolphin was the only cetacean seen.

After lunch we visited Tagus cove on Isabela. A **Galápagos hawk** soared over the cliffs. We climbed above Darwin's Lake, finding a dead male carpenter bee and a **Galápagos flycatcher**. Near the summit I found a **woodpecker finch**, and we watched it feeding for some time in a palo santo tree. We took a panga ride along the

Isabela coast seeing 2 **Galápagos penguins**. Several massive manta rays launched themselves out of the water.

2 December

First stop today was Bartolomé. We ascended to the summit for spectacular views over Pinnacle Rock. Lava cactus and tiqulia grew on the slopes, and painted locusts were present. Ghost crabs scurried along the sandy beach.

In the afternoon we took a panga ride around Black turtle lagoon on Santa Cruz. The green turtles were mating, and we also saw **great blue heron, lava heron and striated heron**. Coral II then sailed around the north coast of Santa Cruz: a **lava gull** landed on the deck, and large numbers of **swallow-tailed gulls** and mating groups of green turtles were seen.

3 December

We visited a tortoise reserve in the Santa Cruz highlands, and saw good numbers of giant tortoises (including some blocking the road!) Big finch flocks were present, and I saw a likely **large-billed tree finch** at the café. A **Galápagos dove** fed around rubbish at Baltra airport. We flew from Baltra to Guayaquil, arriving on the mainland in the early afternoon.

At Guayaquil we walked along the promenade, concentrating on the botanic garden. We saw the following bird species:

Great egret
Pacific parrotlet
Scrub blackbird
Neotropic cormorant
Franklin's gull
Spotted sandpiper
Wattled jacana
Brown pelican
Great-tailed grackle
Pacific hornero
Ecuadorian ground dove
Amazilia hummingbird
Snowy throated kingbird
Tropical kingbird
Vermillion flycatcher
Saffron finch
Southern rough-winged swallow
Blue-grey tanager
Grey-breasted martin

4 December

In the morning we took a cab to the Cerro Blanco Forest Reserve, 25 mins from downtown Guayaquil. The reserve is tropical dry forest, covers 6078 ha, and is owned

by one of Ecuador's largest cement companies. It was very rich in birdlife. We took a 1.5h trail through the forest, and saw the following species:

Thick-billed euphonia
Blue-grey tanager
Amazilia hummingbird
Southern yellow grosbeak
Rusty-margined flycatcher
Turkey vultures
Bananaquit
Grey-cheeked parakeet
Tropical gnatcatcher
Pacific hornero
Yellow-rumped cacique
Fasciated wren
Yellow-tailed oriole
Tropical parula (Marc)
Vermillion flycatcher
Ecuadorian piculet (Marc)
Ecuadorian thrush
Black and white becard
Black-capped sparrow
Southern beardless tyrannulet
Streak-headed woodcreeper
Streaked flycatcher
Red-lored amazon
Grey hawk
Pacific parrotlet
Squirrel coucal
Blue-crowned motmot
Ecuadorian ground dove

There were **snowy egrets** along the River Guay on the return to our hotel. Along the river in the afternoon we saw many of the species we saw yesterday, also **black-necked stilts, yellow-crowned night heron, striated heron, magnificent frigatebird, laughing gull** and **black vulture**.

In total, I saw 56 bird species on Galápagos (including 23 endemics), and 115 species in total.