

TROPICAL BIRDING

Galápagos Endemics Cruise 2009 20 – 27 November 2009

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Galapagos National Park Guide: Patricio “Pato” Vargas Pallo



Tour Report by Andrés Vásquez

Photos: Andrés Vásquez & Steve Huggins (many thanks to Steve for allowing me to use his photos)

Introduction:

Even though a cruise through the Ecuadorian Enchanted Islands is normally a relaxing birding tour, this year's trip faced from the very start a big challenge after having had in 2008 the great luck of getting the first photographic record in 30 years of a bird that seemed to be a Mangrove Finch on Fernandina Island (read the November 2008 TB trip report). The pressure was on my back and the expectations were high. Will we find again the mysterious bird this year? The answer in few words is: WE GOT IT!!! We not only saw it again but this time I am 100% sure it was a Mangrove Finch as we heard it singing clear and loud three times just before I spotted it jumping out right in front of us.

For the second year in a row we cleared all the endemics but this time with such an ease that even I was surprised. This trip was also remarkably good for migrant birds, lots of fish while snorkeling and great displays of whales and dolphins while sea crossing. All that, added to the super-kind and helpful crew of the Yate Fragata and Pato, the naturalist guide, made the 2009 Endemics Cruise pure joy and success.

A trip to the Galapagos Islands is always a once-in-a-life-time experience and the one we had this year was something our guests will never forget. The tame and curious birds, the patient sea turtles, the playful sea lions, the white sandy beaches, the busy nesting cliffs and the spectacular jumps of dolphins will be on our minds for a long, long time.

Itinerary:

- 20-Nov-09 Flight Quito – Baltra & Bachas Beach of Santa Cruz
- 21-Nov-09 Santa Cruz highlands – Charles Darwin Research Station
- 22-Nov-09 San Cristóbal; Manzanillos area – Española; Bahía Gardner
- 23-Nov-09 Floreana; Champion Islet, Punta Cormorant – Elieri Steps
- 24-Nov-09 Isabela; Punta Moreno – Urbina Bay
- 25-Nov-09 Fernandina; Punta Espinosa
- 26-Nov-09 Genovesa; Bahía Darwin – Prince Philip Steps
- 27-Nov-09 North Seymour & Baltra – Flight back to Quito

Nov 20 Flight Quito – Baltra & Bachas Beach of Santa Cruz: The trip started well from the very beginning as just at the airport we had our first endemics, Medium and Small Ground-Finches, which seemed to be awaiting us in the vegetation along the runway. Even before claiming our bags we had great views of another specialty when a Galapagos Dove flew and landed close to us, great views. After a short ride to the pier, while getting ready to go on board, the third ground-ginch showed up; the huge bill of Large Ground-Finch called the attention of the entire group as the bird jumped in front of our binocs. On our way to the dinghies we got our fist Lava (Striated) Heron, Lava Gulls, and curiously even a Galapagos Penguin which was getting some small fish under the dock.

After a short cruise, we found ourselves walking in a paradisiacal beach, Bachas, where we got our fist Galapagos Mockingbirds. We also saw the first migrant species among which Marbled Godwit would be the most interesting. Plenty of Pacific Sea Turtles were swimming very close to shore and we had great views of over seven of those. We started the navigation to Puerto Ayora after dinner.



Nov 21 Santa Cruz highlands – Charles Darwin Research Station: Early that day we visited the highlands of Santa Cruz after a couple of targets. We departed early in a bus straight to the Media Luna area. The day was cloudy at the beginning and started raining as we traveled. On the way two Paint-billed Crakes foraging on the road made us jump out of the bus and the birds cooperated greatly, we all even had one in the scope for a few minutes. Once in the highlands, after no more than ten minutes walking up a muddy trail, we heard the Galapagos Rail. We managed to have great views of it as it came out for over three minutes to an open gap in the undergrowth. For many of us, that was the best sighting of any rail we have ever had. Later on that morning we moved to other areas on the highlands where we got several targets like “Highland” Warbler-Finch, Vegetarian and Woodpecker Finches, Large and Small Tree-

Finches, Galapagos and Vermilion Flycatchers, and Dark-billed Cuckoo. Late in the morning we moved to Finca Las Primicias to see the massive Galapagos Tortoises. A great cheese empanada there was a great closing of a fine morning.

In the afternoon we visited the Charles Darwin Research Station where Pato explained several of the projects of the station. During the walk we saw several Common Cactus-Finches and had better views of the Galapagos Mockingbirds. The rest of the afternoon was very relaxed and everybody spent time in Puerto Ayora wandering around, doing some shopping. We navigated during the night towards San Cristobal.

Nov 22 San Cristóbal; Manzanillos area – Española; Bahía Gardner: We started early in the morning in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, the main city of the island. A short ride to higher areas was needed to look for the endemic San Cristobal Mockingbird, which we saw quickly and quite well, as shown in the picture. Pato took us to a secret spot where he knew the bird was reliable, his brother's backyard! We returned to the yacht at mid morning to head for Española Island.



During the first hour at sea we saw several targets. I spotted the first Waved Albatross of several we saw during the next days. We also got Galapagos Petrel, Galapagos Shearwater, and Wedge-rumped and Band-rumped Storm-Petrels. Steve and Neil were birding from the back of the boat and they saw a Markam's Storm-Petrel, a bird not commonly seen in Galapagos but well-known to Steve from his vast experience in pelagic birding.

We arrived at Española just after lunch and visited Gardner Beach. The walk was pleasant; Española Mockingbirds are always at the beach tamely checking out every new visitor. We got the endemic subspecies of Large Cactus-Finch just in the vegetation behind the beach. We also got the "Lowland" Warbler-Finch further down. Our goal during the walk was the Galapagos Hawk, which we only found when we returned to the beach; however four people had gone snorkeling, so not everyone saw the hawk at Española. We went back to the boat late in the afternoon to start the crossing towards Floreana.



Nov 23 Floreana; Champion Islet, Punta Cormorant – Eleri Steps: The boat anchored two hundred yards away from Champion Islet, one of the only two places we can get the super-local and endangered Floreana Mockingbird. Some who were outside the dining area before breakfast got the mockingbird really well as the bird perched for a second in the yacht railings and flew back to the island. Afterwards, during a very nice dinghy ride, the whole group got great views of the Floreana Mockingbird. On the cliffs of this islet, dozens of Galapagos Shearwaters, Brown

Noddies and Red-billed Tropicbirds nest. We also got the endemic Galapagos Fur Seal resting on the rocks.

By midmorning we moved to Punta Cormorant on the north part of Floreana where a brackish lagoon always holds lots of birds. The most attractive species here were the American Flamingos. The borders of the lake were very active with shorebirds, and we got Stilt and Baird's Sandpipers (rare on Galapagos), Willet, Black-bellied Plover, Wilson's Phalarope, and some nice Black-necked Stilts.

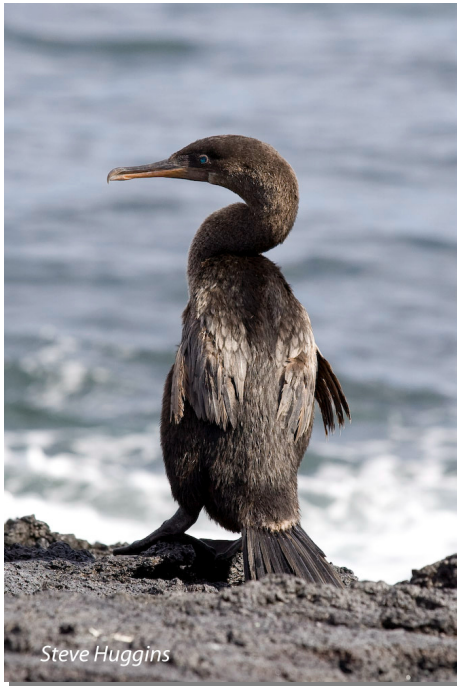


In the afternoon we visited the west part to the island and from the small town of Puerto Velasco Ibarra we took a bus to the highlands where we would look for the endemic and very range restricted Medium Tree-Finch. This year we visited a new area, the Elieri Steps, a recently constructed wooden stairway trail. Upon arrival I heard one calling and so we moved up the steps fast as I did not want to miss the opportunity. Everybody got great views of the calling male while still catching our breaths, which was funny because after spending roughly 15 minutes on the trail we heard over 12 of these Tree-Finches, which were unexpectedly very common here. We all got some more views and I managed to get some good sound recordings. At around 3pm, we started the long cruise towards Isabela, birding from the top deck for some pelagics.

Nov 24 Isabela; Punta Moreno – Urbina Bay: During breakfast, many of us spotted through the windows a Galapagos Penguin swimming close to our boat. Early that day we had a nice walk on the lava fields of Punta Moreno where we had a target to find, the Galapagos Martin. I seriously thought that the Martin could be a miss for this trip but we walked only two minutes on the lava before the guys walking in front spotted a nice female and a couple of males perched on a lone twiggy tree. The Galapagos Martins accompanied us during the whole walk and at some point we could count five of them flying above us. In one of the lagoons we visited, a couple of Pied-billed Grebes were foraging.



After the walk, we rode on the dinghy to get very close to some Flightless Cormorants, another of the endemics that people are dying to see. Most managed to get good pictures of this unique cormorant, and afterwards a nice Galapagos Penguin sitting on a rock also posed for the cameras.



In the afternoon, we navigated towards Urbina Bay, again on Isabela. From the top deck we got good views of both Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Galapagos Shearwaters, and Galapagos Petrels. Bryde's Whales moved close to the boat and groups of Common and Bottlenosed Dolphins were also highlights. Once on Urbina Bay several of us went snorkeling and afterwards, in a short walk, we saw several big Land Iguanas. During the last hours of light we moved through the Bolivar Channel, where some of the group who had not gotten good views of some of the pelagics finally saw them well.

Nov 25 Fernandina; Punta Espinosa: This was the day! After having gotten with amazing ease all the other expected endemics in previous islands I felt confident our good luck was going to be with us again when we touched land early that day in Fernandina. Before starting our walk, I played the song of the Mangrove Finch to all the members of the group to make sure we all know what sound we needed to hear. Once everybody was familiar with this finch's voice, we walked again on lava fields, going from one mangrove patch to another.

We spent over three hours of getting hardly any birds; even the elsewhere very common Small Ground-Finches and Yellow Warblers were scarce here. I have to mention that we saw more Galapagos Martins and a Galapagos Hawk, which was great for the people who had missed it on Española. The sun was starting to hit hard, and half of the group moved back to shore, looking for shade.

Just when I gave up and started saying "well guys, sorry we...." suddenly I had to go quiet as I heard the unmistakable song of the Mangrove Finch. "Shhh.... Did you hear that?" I said with a big smile on my face. We quickly moved closer to the woods and heard it singing closer to us and once more even closer. I spotted the bird low on the trees and an excited "there it is!!!!!!" guided every eye to it. The finch never stopped moving, so the pictures I managed to make are not the best but enough for the confirmation.



I ran towards the shore to get the rest of the group, but when finally they got to the spot the bird was gone. We waited for over 20 minutes to see if the bird showed up again but we did not even hear it once more. It was a bitter-sweet moment, because not everybody got to share this amazing sighting, but for me this was the best moment of the trip.

After lunch we decided to start the longest crossing of the trip towards Genovesa, so we again moved up to the top deck to bird the Bolivar Channel. The activity was really good all afternoon and we got some new ones for us like Pomarine Jaeger, Laughing Gull, and a group Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins, which we saw really well.



Nov 26 Genovesa; Bahía Darwin – Prince Philip’s Steps: For most of the group, this morning’s walk was the most enjoyable of the tour. It is really a beautiful place where we get very close to lots of fearless and attractive birds like Nazca and Red-footed Boobies, the ginger-headed young Great Frigatebirds, nesting Swallow-tailed Gulls, more Lava Gulls, and many Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. The two target species here were not as colorful but represented our cleaning up of all endemics; early during the walk we saw the endemic Genovesa subspecies Large Cactus-Finch, which might soon be split as a different species, and later on we got the small Sharp-beaked Ground-Finch.



In the afternoon, we had a nice walk trying to find the endemic subspecies of Short-eared Owl, but we missed it since there were not many Storm-Petrels on the cliffs, which are the main prey for the owl.



Nov 27 North Seymour & Baltra – Flight back to Quito: The last day in the Galapagos Islands started with a short hike before breakfast. Several breeding frigatebird males were showing off their bright red sacs.

There were no specific target birds to look for this day but we all were happy to see for the last time some of the famous finches, that despite their dullness and small sizes, inspired Darwin; the world looks at nature from a different perspective ever since his visit.

While waiting a couple of hours for our flight back to Quito some of us did some last-minute shopping to bring back some tangible memories of this successful and delightful visit to Ecuador's Enchanted Islands.



List of species:

The taxonomy and nomenclature of the bird list follow (including all updates through December 2008). Codes: r - permanent resident; b - breeding resident; m - northern migrant; v - vagrant; E – Galapagos Endemic.

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| <p>DUCKS, GEESE, WATERFOWL</p> <p>r White-cheeked Pintail</p> <p>GREBES</p> <p>r Pied-billed Grebe</p> <p>FLAMINGOS</p> <p>r American Flamingo</p> <p>PENGUINS</p> <p>r Galapagos Penguin (E)</p> <p>ALBATROSSES</p> <p>b Waved Albatross</p> <p>SHEARWATERS AND PETRELS</p> <p>r Galapagos Petrel</p> <p>r Galapagos Shearwater</p> <p>STORM-PETRELS</p> <p>r White-vented (Elliot's) Storm-Petrel</p> <p>r Band-rumped Storm-Petrel</p> <p>r Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel</p> <p>v Markham's Storm-Petrel</p> <p>TROPICBIRDS</p> <p>r Red-billed Tropicbird</p> <p>BOOBIES AND GANNETS</p> <p>r Nazca Booby</p> <p>r Blue-footed Booby</p> <p>r Red-footed Booby</p> | <p>ANATIDAE</p> <p><i>Anas bahamensis galapagensis</i></p> <p>PODICIPEDIDAE</p> <p><i>Podilymbus podiceps</i></p> <p>PHOENICOPTERIDAE</p> <p><i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i></p> <p>SPHENISCIDAE</p> <p><i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i></p> <p>DIOMEDEIDAE</p> <p><i>Phoebastria irrorata</i></p> <p>PROCELLARIIDAE</p> <p><i>Pterodroma phaeopygia</i></p> <p><i>Puffinus subalaris</i></p> <p>HYDROBATIDAE</p> <p><i>Oceanites gracilis galapagoensis</i></p> <p><i>Oceanodroma castro</i></p> <p><i>Oceanodroma tethys tethys</i></p> <p><i>Oceanodroma markhami</i></p> <p>PHAETHONTIDAE</p> <p><i>Phaethon aethereus</i></p> <p>SULIDAE</p> <p><i>Sula granti</i></p> <p><i>Sula nebouxii excisa</i></p> <p><i>Sula sula websteri</i></p> |
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PELICANS
r Brown Pelican
CORMORANTS AND SHAGS
r Flightless Cormorant (E)
FRIGATEBIRDS
r Magnificent Frigatebird
r Great Frigatebird
HERONS, EGRETS, BITTERNS
r Great Blue Heron
r Cattle Egret
r Striated (Lava) Heron
r Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES
r Galapagos Hawk (E)
RAILS, GALLINULES, COOTS
r Galapagos Rail (E)
r Paint-billed Crake
r Common Moorhen
PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS
m Black-bellied (Gray) Plover
m Semipalmated Plover
OYSTERCATCHERS
r American Oystercatcher
STILTS AND AVOCETS
r Black-necked Stilt
SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES
m Solitary Sandpiper
m Wandering Tattler
m Willet
m Whimbrel
v Marbled Godwit
m Ruddy Turnstone
m Sanderling
m Semipalmated Sandpiper
m Least Sandpiper
v Baird's Sandpiper
v Stilt Sandpiper
m Wilson's Phalarope
m Red-necked Phalarope
m Red Phalarope
GULLS
r Swallow-tailed Gull
m Laughing Gull
m Franklin's Gull
r Lava Gull (E)
TERNs
r Brown Noddy
SKUAS AND JAEGERs
m Pomarine Jaeger
PIGEONS AND DOVES
r Galapagos Dove (E)
CUCKOOs
r Dark-billed Cuckoo
r Smooth-billed Ani (I)
TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

PELECANIDAE
Pelecanus occidentalis urinator
PHALACROCORACIDAE
Phalacrocorax harrisi
FREGATIDAE
Fregata magnificens
Fregata minor
ARDEIDAE
Ardea herodias cognata
Bubulcus ibis
Butorides striata sundevalli
Nyctanassa violacea pauper
ACCIPITRIDAE
Buteo galapagoensis
RALLIDAE
Laterallus spilonotus
Neocrex erythrops erythrops
Gallinula chloropus cachinnans
CHARADRIIDAE
Pluvialis squatarola
Charadrius semipalmatus
HAEMATOPODIDAE
Haematopus palliatus galapagensis
RECURVIROSTRIDAE
Himantopus mexicanus
SCOLOPACIDAE
Tringa solitaria
Tringa incana
Tringa semipalmata
Numenius phaeopus
Limosa fedoa
Arenaria interpres
Calidris alba
Calidris pusilla
Calidris minutilla
Calidris bairdii
Calidris himantopus
Phalaropus tricolor
Phalaropus lobatus
Phalaropus fulicarius
LARIDAE: LARINAE
Creagrus furcatus
Leucophaeus atricilla
Leucophaeus pipixcan
Leucophaeus fuliginosus
LARIDAE: STERNINAE
Anous stolidus galapagensis
STERCORARIIDAE
Stercorarius pomarinus
COLUMBIDAE
Zenaida galapagoensis galapagoensis
CUCULIDAE
Coccyzus melacoryphus
Crotophaga ani
TYRANNIDAE

- r Vermilion Flycatcher
- r Galapagos Flycatcher (E)

SWALLOWS

- r Galapagos Martin (E)

MOCKINGBIRDS

- r Galapagos Mockingbird (E)
- r Charles Mockingbird (E)
- r Hood Mockingbird (E)
- r San Cristobal Mockingbird (E)

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

- r Yellow Warbler

EMBERIZID FINCHES

- r "Highland" Warbler Finch (E)
- r "Lowland" Warbler Finch (E)
- r Vegetarian Finch (E)
- r Woodpecker Finch (E)
- r Large Tree-Finch (E)
- r Medium Tree-Finch (E)
- r Small Tree-Finch (E)
- r Mangrove Finch (E)
- r Small Ground-Finch (E)
- r Large Ground-Finch (E)
- r Sharp-beaked Ground-Finch (E)
- r Common Cactus-Finch (E)
- r Medium Ground-Finch (E)
- r Large Cactus-Finch (E) (Española)
- r Large Cactus-Finch (E) (Genovesa)

Pyrocephalus rubinus nanus

Myiarchus magnirostris

HIRUNDINIDAE

Progne modesta

MIMIDAE

Nesomimus parvulus

Nesomimus trifasciatus

Nesomimus macdonaldi

Nesomimus melanotis

PARULIDAE

Dendroica petechia aureola

EMBERIZIDAE

Certhidea olivacea olivacea/ridgwayii

Certhidea olivacea cinerascens/mentalis

Platypiza crassirostris

Camarhynchus pallidus

Camarhynchus psittacula

Camarhynchus pauper

Camarhynchus parvulus

Camarhynchus heliobates

Geospiza fuliginosa

Geospiza magnirostris

Geospiza difficilis

Geospiza scandens

Geospiza fortis

Geospiza conirostris conirostris

Geospiza conirostris propinqua

REPTILES

- r Galapagos Tortoise (E)
- r Pacific Green Turtle
- r Marine Iguana (E)
- r Land Iguana (E)
- r Galapagos Lava Lizard (E)
- r Española Lava Lizard (E)

Geochelone elephantopus

Chelonia midas agassisi

Amblyrhynchus cristatus

Conolophus subcristatus

Microlophus albemarlensis

Microlophus delanonis

MAMMALS

- r California (Galapagos) Sea Lion
- r Galapagos Fur Seal (E)
- r Bryde's Whale
- m Common Dolphin
- m Long-snouted Spinner Dolphin
- r Bottle-nosed Dolphin

Zalophus californianus wollebacki

Arctocephalus galapagoensis

Balaenoptera edeni

Delphinus delphis

Stenella longirostris

Tursiops truncatus

FISH

- r King Angelfish
- r Barberfish
- r Scythe Butterflyfish
- r Yellowtailed Surgeonfish
- r Moorish Idol
- r Steel Pompano
- r Dusky Chub
- r Yellowtailed Mollet
- r Galapagos Mollet
- r Black-striped Salema (E)

Holocanthus passer

Johnrandallia nigrirostris

Chaetodon falcifer

Prionurus laticlavus

Zanclus comutus

Trachinotus stilbe

Girella freminvillei

Mugil rammelsbergi

Mugil galapagensis

Xenocys jessiae

- r Flying Fish
- r Giant Damselfish
- r Panamic Sargeant Major
- r Brown Chromis
- r Creole Fish
- r Blue-chinned Parrotfish
- r Bicoler Parrotfish
- r Rainbow Wrasse
- r Large-banded (Panamic) Blenny
- r Hieroglyphic Hawkfish
- r Concentric Pufferfish
- r Yellow-bellied Triggerfish
- r Sun Fish
- r White-tipped Reef Shark (E)
- r Marbled Ray
- r Eagle Ray

Exocoetidae spp.
Microspathodon dorsalis
Abudefduf troschelii
Chromis atrilobata
Paranthias colonus
Scarus ghobban
Scarus rubroviolaceus
Thalassoma lucasanum
Ophioblennius steindachneri
Cirrhitus rivulatus
Sphoeroides annulatus
Sufflamen verres
Mola mola
Triaenodon obesus
Taeniura meyeri
Aetobatus narinari

TERRESTRIAL INVERTEBRATES

- r Galápagos Sulphur Butterfly (E)
- r Galápagos Silver Fritillary (E)
- r Galápagos Blue Butterfly (E)
- r Darwin Carpenter Bee
- r Yellow Paper Wasp
- r Spot-winged Dragonfly
- r Galápagos Painted Locust (E)
- r Spiny Spider

Phoebis sennae
Agraulis vallinae
Leptodes parrhasioides
Xylocopa darwini
Polistes versicolor
Pantala hymaena
Schistocerca literosa
Gasteracantha sp.

MARINE INVERTEBRATES

- r Thatched-roof Barnacle
- r Sally Light-foot Crab
- r Terrestrial Hermit Crab
- r Pencil Sea Urchin
- r Green Sea Urchin
- r Needle Sea Urchin
- r Chocolate-chip Sea Star
- r Panamic Sea Star
- r Blue Sea Star

Tetraclita milleporosa
Grapsus grapsus
Coenobita compressus
Eucidaris thouarsii
Lytechinus semituberculatus
Diadema mexicana
Nidorellia armata
Pentaceraster cumingi
Phataria unifascialis



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