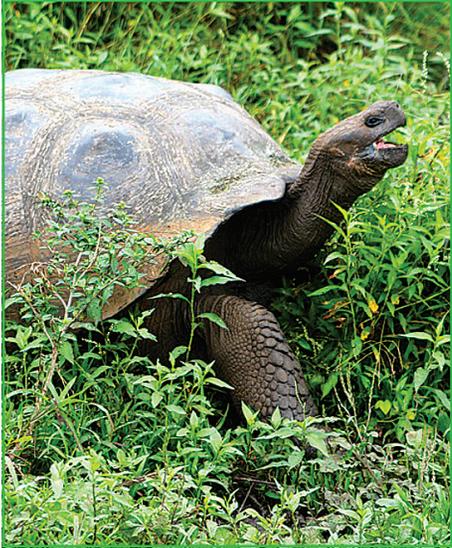


WILDLIFE OF THE GALAPAGOS

Four Amazing Species You Won't Find Anywhere Else



BY BRET LOVE

WE WERE RECENTLY fortunate to be invited on a 7-day trip to the Galapagos Islands with Ecoventura, a small ship eco-cruise company. We spent a wonderful week cruising from island to island, hiking and snorkeling several times a day, and learning all about the land that informed Darwin's Theory Of Evolution. There are myriad intriguing Galapagos wildlife species, but here are four rare ones that captured our hearts:

GALAPAGOS TORTOISES

The Galapagos Islands don't have an official mascot, but if they did it would be the Galapagos Tortoise. These prehistoric-looking creatures can live over 150 years, and have played an integral role in Galapagos history.

The islands' natural resources have been exploited since they were discovered, from the pirates of the 17th-18th centuries to 19th century whalers. The tortoises were nearly hunted to extinction for their meat and ability to live for up to a year without food or water, with numbers dwindling to around 3,000 in the 1970s. But they were also a key influence on Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, as tortoises from different islands clearly differed in size and appearance, suggesting they genetically adapted to their respective environments. Fortunately, conservation efforts have proven effective, and by the year 2000 the tortoise population had risen to over 19,000.

We learned more about those efforts at the Charles Darwin Research Station on the island of Santa Cruz, where guide Ceci Guerrero told us how scientists used incubators to control the sex of each egg, turning it warmer to make "hot babes" and colder to create "cool dudes." Once hatched, the babies are numbered, which made them look like a reptilian NASCAR race waiting to happen.

The Station is also home to the most famous celebrity in the Galapagos, Lonesome George, the last of his Pinta Island subspecies. George, who's been called the rarest creature in the world, appears on hats, T-shirts and books, but unfortunately doesn't appear interested in mating with any of the "hot babes" in his enclosure. In fact, on the day we visited, the only thing George appeared interested in was sleep.

He should take some tips from Diego, who was returned from the San Diego Zoo in the '70s. At the time, there were 2

males and 12 females of Diego's Española subspecies at the station, but they weren't breeding. Like the Marvin Gaye of the Tortoise world, Diego taught the others how to get it on and ultimately produced 1700 offspring, earning him the nickname "The Professor." As a result of these efforts, today 10 subspecies of Galapagos Tortoises survive in the wild, with thousands of captive-bred juveniles released onto their native islands and strict laws in place to ensure their protection.

We also paid a visit to Rancho Primicias, where many tortoises live in the wild. It's difficult to describe the feeling of being within a few feet of a creature four times your age and at least twice your size, but the experience was both humbling and heartwarming. Here, mankind and animals are learning how to co-exist peacefully and sustainably, and the Tortoise stands tall as a symbol, not just of the Galapagos Islands, but of wildlife conservation efforts all around the world.

MARINE IGUANAS

There's no denying the fact that marine iguanas are SERIOUSLY freaky. They look like little miniature Godzillas, hissing and sneezing (in order to expel excess salt from their nasal glands) and tending to clutter en masse like kittens.

Charles Darwin was notoriously revolted by their appearance, writing in his Beagle diary, "The black Lava rocks on the beach are frequented by large, disgusting clumsy Lizards. They are as black as the porous rocks over which they crawl and seek their prey from the Sea. I call them 'imps of darkness.'"

Marine Iguanas can be found pretty much everywhere in the Galapagos, but they seem to love congregating on the islands' lava-strewn shores, where they can rapidly absorb heat from the sun to warm their bodies after a swim. They vary greatly from island to island in terms of size and color, from the teal green-tinged adult males on Española to the brick red colors of the subspecies on Fernandina, where there were so many marine iguanas that you had to watch where you walked for fear of stepping on one.

On land they appear graceless and clumsy, but their flattened tails and spiky dorsal fins make them a wonder to behold in the water. It's extremely bizarre to be snorkeling and see a 3- to 5-foot long lizard feeding on algae 25 feet below you, then shimmying their prehistoric-looking bodies like snakes

to swim to the surface for air. But, after a few encounters with this rare and remarkable species, we grew to love them, treasuring their crusty cuteness and their puppy-like penchant for being contantly underfoot.

FLIGHTLESS CORMORANTS

The Flightless Cormorant is among the most rare bird species in the world, with Birdlife.org estimating around 900 individuals living on the Galapagos Islands in 2009. They were nearly wiped out by El Nino, but thanks to conservation efforts their numbers have more than doubled since 1983.

The Flightless Cormorant is definitely an odd bird, with black and brown feathers, brilliant turquoise eyes, low growling voices, and wings about 1/3 the size that would be required in order for the bird to fly. Their feathers aren't waterproof, so they spend a lot of time drying their short, stubby appendages in the sunlight.

But while they may not be able to fly, in the water they're like feathered rockets, using their webbed feet and powerful legs to dive down to the bottom of the ocean in search of fish, eels and other small prey.

You know you're witnessing something rare when your guide gets pumped up. So when veteran naturalist Yvonne Mortola shouted out that she'd spotted a Flightless Cormorant mating dance on the shore of Fernandina Island, we ran to watch the show. Their graceful moves reminded us of the scene where Cinderella and Prince Charming danced together at the Ball as her wicked stepsisters looked on in envy.

The male and female cormorant courted one another in an elegant aquatic waltz, shaking their heads dramatically while circling one another. The other two females looked extremely eager to cut in on the action, but our avian Cinderella wasn't having it, chasing them off fiercely every time they got too close. It was an extraordinary scene, with sea turtles popping their heads up out of the water like chaperones at the prom, and a marine iguana swimming through the scene like some sort of party-crashing stalker.

Eventually our two lovebirds made their way back onto the beach, where they continued their courtship dance, rubbing their heads together and tightening up their circle of love. Soon they'll build a seaweed nest above the high-tide mark, with the male bringing his lady friend gifts of flotsam from

the ocean. She'll lay 3 eggs, with just one likely to survive, and they'll share parenting responsibilities until the chick is old enough to be independent. Then they'll go their separate ways, and the Flightless Cormorants' season of love will start anew...

GALAPAGOS SEA LIONS

Sea Lions may be on the endangered species list, but in the Galapagos Islands they're so ubiquitous that they run the risk of being taken for granted. Here, you can find this unofficial welcoming committee almost everywhere: In public parks, on the San Cristobal docks, and on every beach of every island.

Distinguishable from fur seals by their earflaps, sea lions seem awkward and clumsy on land, with a lurching side-to-side gait, loud barks and an array of bodily noises that can make them sound like a crew of flatulent sailors. But once they reach the water, they transform into something magical, like elegant ballet dancers of the oceanic world.

They also prove eminently playful and curious, and the rule of keeping six feet of distance from all Galapagos wildlife gets tossed out the window once you realize they can swim much faster than you can. With their huge eyes, cute faces and funny flippers, the sea lions' charms proved impossible to resist.

Our most memorable encounter came during a snorkel off the island of Santiago. We'd just gotten into our wetsuits when our friends shouted that they'd spotted a sea lion. I swam along beside him as he floated lazily. But as I twisted and turned to get the best shot, it was like he thought I was trying to play. He began swimming faster and faster, coming closer with each subsequent pass, until I could've easily reached out and touched him. The more I contorted my body to keep him in frame, the more playful he got, zooming beneath me like a torpedo, blowing bubbles and flipping out of the water. I dove down and tried to mimic him, only to realize he was mimicking me. It was exhausting, and also one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life.

On our last night in the Galapagos, we made our way to beautiful Gardner Bay on the island of Española. Here, on a white sandy beach, hundreds of sea lions live in large colonies. Pups nurse from their mothers, juveniles frolic in the cerulean blue surf, and male bulls battle for dominance over their harems. It was an amazing way to wind down our once-in-a-lifetime Galapagos experience.