GALAPAGOS

BIG 15

METROPOLITAN TOURING

GALAPAGOS ICONIC SPECIES

METROPOLITAN TOURING

70 YEARS

Given the vastness of the **Galapagos archipelago**, deciding where to go and what to see can be difficult. The Galapagos Big15 list of iconic species is the result of a collaboration between **scholars, naturalist guides, scientists, and island connoisseurs**. It features the archipelago's most unique and fascinating wildlife. We at Metropolitan Touring use this list to ensure that travelers have access to the very best **wildlife** within the **Galapagos National Park**. And it's a great way for explorers to choose their ideal experience and start dreaming of their upcoming visit to this amazing destination.

You are welcome to peruse this **wonderful list** and let it guide your imagination as you chart the perfect itinerary in your mind. See Galapagos from the perspective of its magical residents, the **Galapagos Big15**.

American Flamingo, Floreana Island

GALAPAGOS ALBATROSS

The Galapagos albatross, **also known as the waved albatross**, has a wingspan that can reach 250 centimeters, making it the **largest bird in the Galapagos** (8.2 feet).
Due to the vulnerability of having only one primary breeding site, the close to 35,000 breeding pairs have been categorized as **critically endangered since 2007**. The spectacular mating dance of albatrosses involves circling and beak clacking. Despite having a reputation for being fully monogamous, long-term behavioral research has shown that individuals do mate with birds they do not share a nest with.

The waved albatross has a breeding cycle that is relatively predictable compared to most other Galapagos animal species. The only member of this list that is seasonal, **they can be seen on the island between the months of April and December.**
This species can only be appreciated with specific itineraries.

Already seen it! ☐

BLUE-FOOTED BOOBY

The blue-footed boobies (Sula nebouxii) are loved by tourists because of their conspicuous, surreal-looking **blue feet** and their famous, **entertaining mating dance,** in which the male displays his feet to attract females. **Potential partners find feet that are more turquoise blue in color rather than deep blue to be more alluring**. A male's ability to feed himself is determined by the color of his skin, which is connected to the amount of food he consumes.

They can be seen while catching fish with spectacular plunge dives and frequently pursuing fish underwater. While they also nest in other parts of Latin America between the Pacific Coast of Mexico and Peru, **around half of all blue-footed boobies live on the Galapagos**.

The **three species of boobies** that breed on the **Galapagos Islands** are members of the Sulidae family of seabirds, which is best known for some of its **distinctively colorful anatomical features**.

☐ **Already seen it!**

NAZCA BOOBY

The largest Booby on the islands, the Nazca Booby **differs from the masked booby** in appearance by having an orange beak, as opposed to a yellow one. This snow-white booby is the most ferociously **Darwinist** and often cause **harm to members of their own species** and their distant relatives, the **blue-footed boobies**.

On **Genovesa**, Nazca Boobies typically build their nests along the shoreline. Without the parents intervening, **hatchlings frequently push their smaller siblings out of the nest**, committing siblicide on a regular basis.

Female Nazca boobies **lay two eggs,** four to five days apart, so that if the first one is eaten or broken, the second one might still hatch. They can be **recognized when flying thanks to their black tail and wing feathers**.

Already seen it! ☐

RED-FOOTED BOOBY

The red-footed booby (Sula sula) is **the archipelago's most numerous, despite being the least seen by humans**. They nest primarily on **Genovesa** and **San Cristobal Islands** but are occasionally seen elsewhere in the archipelago. For them, living in the archipelago's outskirts makes perfect sense, as they prefer flying fish, which they catch due to their **incredible high-speed flying skills**.

Distribution Restriction: found on **Genovesa**, **Punta Pitt** (the eastern tip of **San Cristobal**), and **North Seymour**; small numbers breed on one of **Floreana's** satellite islets, and a very small number nest on **North Seymour**.

This species can only be appreciated with specific itineraries.

☐ **Already seen it!**

FLIGHTLESS (GALAPAGOS) CORMORANT

The Galapagos or Flightless Cormorant (Phalacrocorax harrisi) is the **rarest, largest, and most distinctive extant cormorant in the world**.

Perhaps their most unusual trait, besides their flightless nature, is their mating behaviors: **roles are partially reversed in courtship** – i.e., **females lead** and **are more active than males in courtship** and **compete aggressively for access to males**. The female normally **deserts its mate and offspring** to re-mate serially with different males **while males raise the young unaided**.

Distribution Restriction: Found only on **Fernandina** and the west coast of **Isabela**.

This species can only be appreciated with specific itineraries.

Scientific contributor: Dr. Carlos Valle, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador.

Already seen it! ☐

METROPOLITAN TOURING

AMERICAN FLAMINGO

The flamingos in the **Galapagos Islands** are members of the **American flamingo** (Phoenicopterus ruber). An unusual southwest outlier, given that the rest of the species breeds along the Colombian and Caribbean coasts, the colony in the **Galapagos** is a testament to **how far a species can travel**.

The **distinctive color of these birds is associated with their shrimp-based diet** (which is high in **carotenoids**).

Among the largest birds in the archipelago, flamingos can stand up to 145 centimetres (57 inches) tall. The **most recent bird-count registered 314 individuals** of this species in the archipelago.

☐ **Already seen it!**

FRIGATEBIRDS: GREAT AND MAGNIFICENT

Unusually, two different species of frigatebird coexist practically side by side on the Galapagos: the great (Fregata minor) and the magnificent (Fregata magnificens). While they have a wide distribution through tropical oceans, **there is nowhere one can approach them more closely** than on the **Galapagos**. The **magnificent frigatebird** is **more pelagic**, foraging for fish out at sea for long periods of time, while **the great frigatebird** is **more coastal**. They catch most of their food on the wing, sometimes **robbing other seabirds**.

Male great frigates have a **green sheen on their shoulder plumage**, while **magnificent males have a purple sheen. Magnificent frigate females** have a **black triangle** of feathers running down from the base of the chin to the center of their white chests. As a result, a **white "M"** is visible from below. **Great frigate females have white** all the way up their chins.
Distribution Note: All Galapagos locations will have frigatebirds flying around, but top places to see their nesting colonies include **San Cristobal**, **Española**, and **Genovesa Islands**.

Already seen it! ☐

GALAPAGOS HAWK

The **Galapagos hawk** (Buteo galapagoensis), a large endemic **bird of prey,** holds the distinction of being the **apex predator in the archipelago**. As such, **it has no natural enemies, but is sadly classified as vulnerable by the IUCN**. Genetic investigation indicates that it is **among the most recent native arrivals to the islands**, having reached them around **300,000** years ago.

They are **present on most islands, but uncommon**, with perhaps **150 breeding pairs.** They **prey on young land and marine iguanas, hatchlings of tortoises and sea turtles, as well as insects like locusts and centipedes.** They may hunt in **groups of up to three hawks** and sometimes **feed on carrion**. Given the **nature of diversity** on the **Galapagos Islands**, the hawks show a **significant variety of sizes**, with wingspans ranging from **116cm (46 inches)** on **Marchena** to **140cm (55 inches)**, on **Española**.

☐ **Already seen it!**

LAND IGUANA

The Galapagos land iguana (Conolophus subcristatus) lives on several islands, making it the **most widely distributed land** iguana in the **Galapagos**. **The biggest adults can weigh 13 kilogrammes (30 pounds)**.

Land iguanas **feed mainly on plants** (mostly **cacti** and other **succulent plants**, so they can survive long periods of time without the need of water), but **may also feed on anything else available**, even carrion.

To remove the **small and annoying spines of cactus fruit, land iguanas are known to roll them repeatedly over sand and stones before eating them**. These reptiles have a life expectancy of about 50 to 60 years.

During the hot season **(December-May)** their **courtship behavior is quite amazing** to observe with **aggressive chasing, territorial displays**, and the development of **bright brown and yellow coloration in their skin.**

Already seen it! ☐

MARINE IGUANA

The marine iguana (Amblyrhynchus cristatus) is one of the **most amazing Galapagos inhabitants.** Few species show such **astonishing adaptations and evolutionary changes.** Called **"imps of darkness"** by **Charles Darwin**, they **arrived as terrestrial iguanas, evolved into their marine status** and then **spread throughout the archipelago**.

Their adaptations to a marine habitat **include a reduced heartbeat and constriction of blood vessels near its skin** to avoid **temperature and oxygen loss**. Marine iguanas also have a supersized supraorbital gland as a means of extracting excess salt from their blood flow. This is what enables that famous sneezing behavior.
Their life span is shorter than land iguanas, believed to be around 40 years. All visitors to Galapagos get to see marine iguanas, but they vary significantly from island to island. On **Genovesa Island** the **smallest species** (A. cristatus nanus) can be seen, while **Fernandina** and **Northern Isabela** host **the largest** (A. cristatus cristatus).

☐ **Already seen it!**

SANTA FE LAND IGUANA

The Santa Fe land iguana (Conolophus pallidus) lives exclusively on **Santa Fe**, a small island off the eastern coast of **Santa Cruz**. Perfectly adapted to **blend in with its surroundings**, it is somewhat more difficult to observe than its relatives.

It weighs up to **11 kilograms** (25 pounds). Beyond their **plant diet**, which **consists overwhelmingly of the island's prickly-pear cactus**, some individuals have been discovered to **eat insects and carrion**. When in blooming season, they **feast** on the **yellow flowers** of the genus **Portulaca**.

Distribution Restriction: This island-endemic reptile **can only be seen** on **Santa Fe Island.**

Already seen it! ☐

GALAPAGOS PENGUIN

The Galapagos penguins (Spheniscus mendiculus) are the only penguins that live on the equator, the only penguins that molt twice a year, and **the rarest of the 18 penguin species.**

The **Galapagos penguin** is the second-smallest penguin, weighing approximately two kilograms. Males have thicker bills than females because they are larger and heavier. The Galapagos penguin is the only species of penguin that has no set breeding season, can lay eggs up to three times a year, and **can raise two chicks in about three months** when food is plentiful.

These **penguins** can survive on the **equator because their breeding biology is adapted** to the Galapagos archipelago's unpredictable upwelling of productive, nutrient-rich water.

☐ **Already seen it!**

GALAPAGOS SEA LION

The **Galapagos sea lion** (Zalophus wollebaeckii) is an especially fascinating seal species because it **lives right on the equator**, where it is subjected to more heat and potentially less food than colder-climate species. Despite this, **the Galapagos' productivity and the sea lion's adaptations allow it to thrive.** This is the **smallest sea lion species,** with females weighing around **75 kilograms** (165 pounds) and males weighing up to **200 kilograms** (440 pounds).

They can be found throughout the **Galapagos** but are most common in the central islands. Nonetheless, because they are an **endemic species** in a small area, they are listed as **endangered**.

Already seen it! ☐

GALAPAGOS FUR SEAL

The Galapagos fur seal (Arctocephalus galapagoensis) is the smallest of all seals, with females weighing approximately **30 kilograms** (66 pounds) and males weighing approximately **80 kilograms** (176). It appears to have **arrived relatively recently in the archipelago** and is more like its mainland relative than the **Galapagos** sea lion. There is currently a population of around 15,000 individuals, but they are extremely vulnerable to **El Niño** events, which put young pups at risk of starvation.

They are mostly found on **Fernandina** and the **western side of Isabela**, but they can also be found in other parts of the **Galapagos**, most notably Puerto Egas, North Seymour, and Genovesa.

☐ **Already seen it!**

GALAPAGOS GIANT TORTOISE

The Galapagos giant tortoise (Chelonoidis nigra) is the **world's largest tortoise**. Weighing up to **250kg** (550 pounds) their enormous size prompted **16th-century Spanish explorers** to apply the archipelago's **Spanish name to the entire archipelago**. They are the **dominant plant eaters on the islands** and play an important role as the top grazer in their habitats. In the wild, these gentle giants move slowly through the plant cover. Their **shells vary in shape from island to island** and, on **Isabela**, from volcano to volcano.

Larger tortoises with domed shells and shorter necks are found on humid islands, while smaller tortoises with "saddleback" shells and long necks are found on dry islands. Growing slowly, they frequently live to be **well over 100 years old.**

Already seen it! ☐

GALAPAGOS

BIG 15

- Galapagos Albatross
- Blue-footed Booby
- Nazca Booby
- Red-footed Booby
- Flightless Cormorant
- American Flamingo
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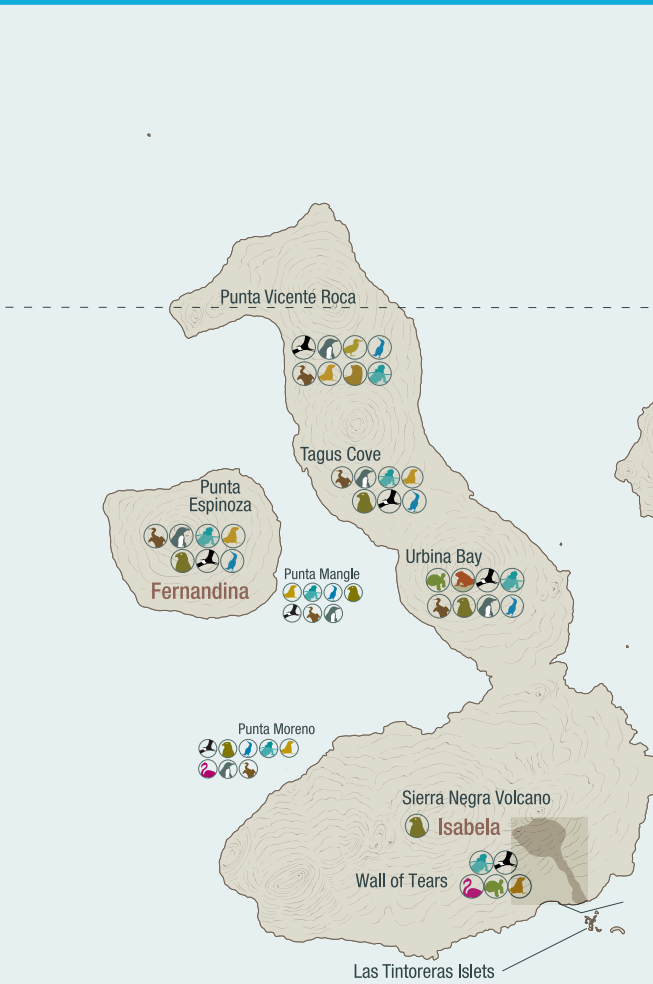
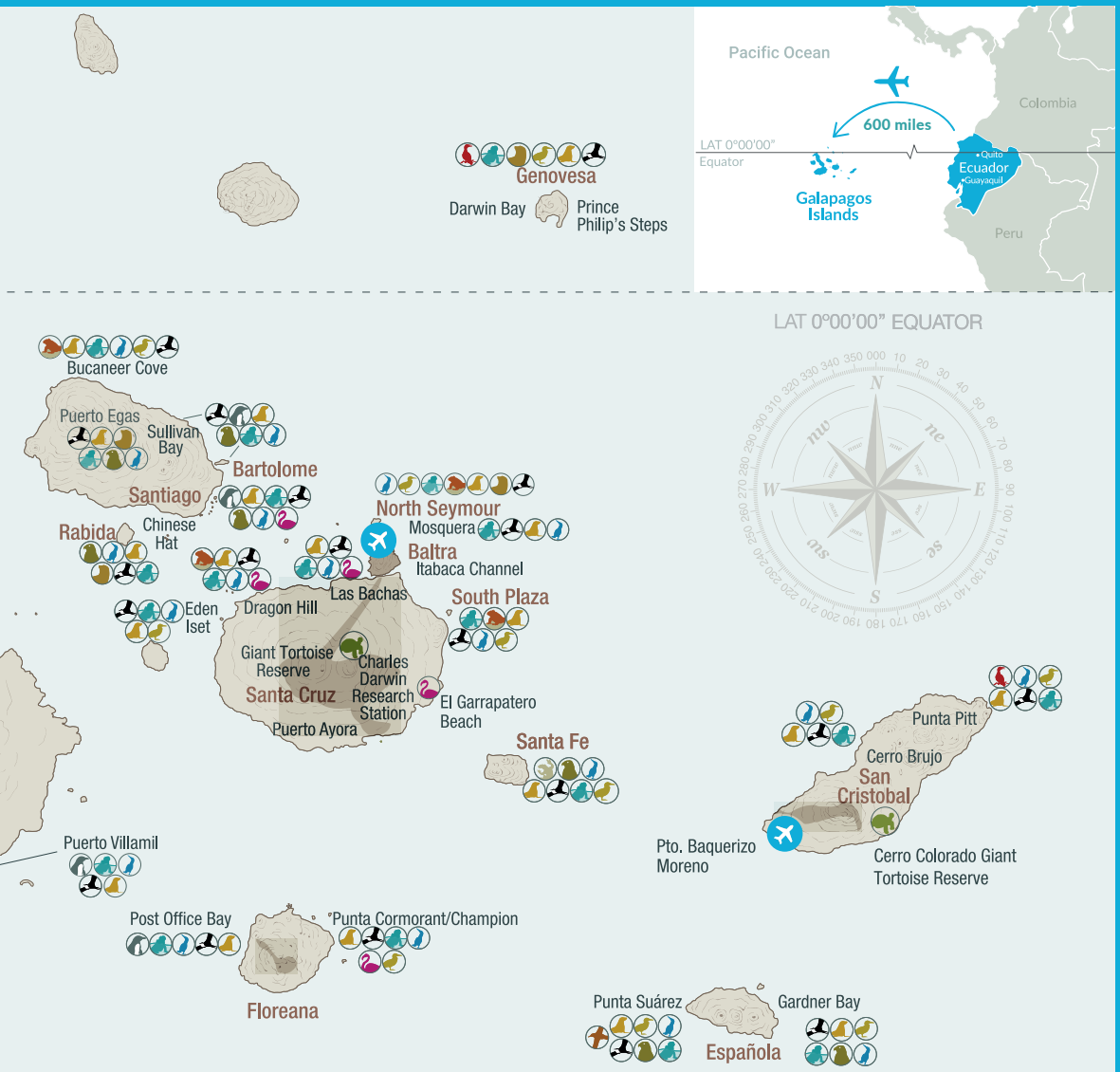
- Land Iguana
- Marine Iguana
- Santa Fe Iguana
- Galapagos Penguin
- Galapagos Sea Lion
- Galapagos Fur Seal
- Galapagos Giant Tortoise



Populated areas

Galapagos National Park


Pacific Ocean
600 miles
LAT 0°00'00"
Equator
Galapagos Islands
Colombia
Quito
Ecuador
Guayaquil
Peru
Genovesa
Darwin Bay
Prince Philip's Steps
LAT 0°00'00" EQUATOR
Bucaneer Cove
Puerto Egas
Sullivan Bay
Bartolome
Santiago
Rabida
Chinese Hat
North Seymour
Mosquera
Baltra
Itabaca Channel
Las Bachas
Eden Iset
Dragon Hill
South Plaza
Giant Tortoise Reserve
Charles Darwin Research Station
Santa Cruz
Puerto Ayora
El Garrapatero Beach
Santa Fe
Punta Pitt
Cerro Brujo
San Cristobal
Pto. Baquerizo Moreno
Cerro Colorado Giant Tortoise Reserve
Puerto Villamil
Post Office Bay
Punta Cormorant/Champion
Floreana
Punta Suárez
Gardner Bay
Española

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