

## Photographing in the Galapagos

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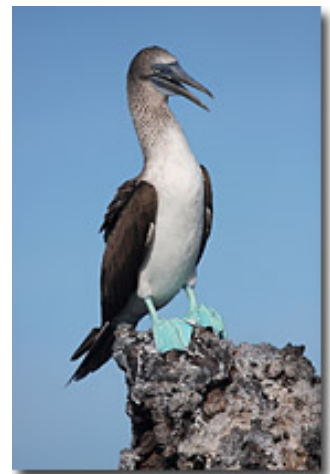
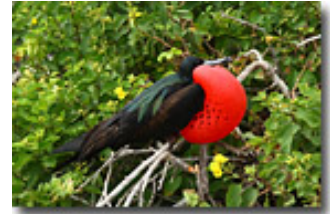
In May of 2008 I fulfilled a long time photography goal by traveling to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands for a photo tour. The trip was organized by professional photographer and friend, Tom Ulrich. Most of the sixteen individuals on the trip were photographers and friends of Tom. The itinerary chosen included visits to six islands in seven days aboard the 75-foot boat, the Floreana.

I have seen many photographs brought back from the Galapagos over the years by friends and acquaintances. In many instances, they show birds and animals on the ground, photographed from a standing position, using medium focal length lenses, and shot during midday's harsh light. You've probably seen them, the standard Red Footed Booby standing in the middle of the trail photo. I hoped to capture something that wasn't so typical. I carried two Canon digital camera bodies with a 1.6 crop factor, a 100-400 mm image stabilized lens with a 1.4x extender, a 18-85 mm IS zoom, and a 10-22 mm zoom, along with polarizers for all the lenses. Trying to avoid weight on the long hikes that I knew were ahead, I did not bring a tripod. That is one decision that I regretted at times. Rounding out my equipment were a laptop and a 160GB portable hard drive for downloading and backing up a considerable number of raw images.

In addition to a full and varied itinerary, one important ingredient to a successful photo trip is getting the right Galapagos Park guide. No group visits the Galapagos National Park without a guide. Rules about access to the wildlife are very specific and can be interpreted so strictly that a photographer may be very limited. You can be prohibited by your guide from closely approaching the animals, or not allowed off the trail. In a non-photographic tour group, you may not have enough time to carefully photograph a subject. In addition, some park guides are reluctant to go ashore at sunrise, keeping in mind that on the equator, the light is harsh and the sun is hot by nine a.m. We were extremely fortunate to have a park guide that was willing to go ashore before sunrise and he convinced the crew to take us ashore at an early hour. Our guide had just purchased a new D60 Nikon and lenses and was very interested in taking great pictures of the wildlife he saw every day. Of course, we were happy to teach him everything we knew, and in return he allowed us to approach the wildlife so long as we did no harm, and he tolerated our slow pace.

All of the islands are unique and may offer different colored beach sand and terrain, as well as some unique species. Arriving at daybreak made me wish for the tripod I didn't bring, but very shortly as the sun rose above the horizon, enough light would be available to make a sharp photo handheld. The variety of wildlife, much of it unique in the world, their tolerance for a close approach by a photographer, and just the sheer beauty and wildness of the islands were spectacular. I wore old, comfortable clothes and shot much of the time laying on my stomach or kneeling. Tolerant wildlife allowed for many close up photos using a wide-angle lens for a different perspective, including more in-focus environment. The convergence of warm and cold ocean currents provide a rich source of food for the Galapagos wildlife. We photographed Red Footed, Blue Footed and Masked Boobies, nesting Frigates, Marine and Land Iguanas, Galapagos Hawks, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Galapagos Penguins, Tortoises, Sea Turtles and much more. There was ample opportunity for snorkeling with the wildlife. I did not invest in an expensive underwater housing for my cameras for this trip and of course underwater photography is another challenge altogether. If this is your thing you will find some great opportunities in the clear Pacific waters around the Galapagos Islands.

If you have not been to the Galapagos, I hope you will be able to go someday soon. I strongly recommend a photo tour led by a professional that has visited the islands before. They are more likely to know how to work with the guides to accommodate photographers and can arrange the best itinerary for the most varied wildlife. Plan on a minimum of seven to ten days, and don't forget



to look up from your viewfinder once in a while, take a deep breath and say to yourself, "I can't believe that I am actually in this place!"

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**Colin Smith** has photographed wildlife and landscapes in the US and Canada for several years. He has been published in Outdoor and Nature Photography, Tulsa World, Outdoor Oklahoma, and has written articles illustrated with photos on wildlife photography for the Photographic Society of America Journal, Nature Photographers, and PhotoMigrations online magazines. A number of his images are found in the new Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas. Colin has lectured and presented slide programs on wildlife photography in several cities, and for several organizations including the Photography Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City and Tulsa Community College. Colin produces quality professional images and devotes his efforts full time to nature and wildlife photography with an extensive stock file of North American wildlife and landscapes.



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