

Abby Lodge
Wildlife of the Galapagos Islands Video

In the Galapagos there is a strange mix of animals – you wouldn't expect tropical corals and penguins in the same place. Due to tectonic plates, Galapagos Islands are drifting towards south America. Subduction is occurring and the plate that the islands are on are slowly sinking under the continental plate of South America. Land birds are thought to have been blown by wind from mainland to the islands and then began mating and stayed on the islands. They probably arrived three million years ago. These birds however, fill lots of different niches and everything is about their beak.

There are different species of sea turtles as well, though the Pacific green sea turtle is the only species that nests in Galapagos. The Galapagos giant tortoise are different than sea turtles in that they have very long necks, legs not flippers, and don't swim. It is thought that their ancestors came from the jungles of Brazil or Costa Rica and were brought to the islands with the ocean current and that maybe some females were pregnant. Then there are land iguanas and marine iguanas that probably came from the mainland on a tree trunk sort of raft. They eventually evolved differently as some were forced inland to find food and other forces to the ocean. The marine iguana is the only lizard in the world that can swim in salt water and drive looking for algae. The body structure of the two lizards is different. The marine iguana is adapted for swimming – their tail is longer than body and flatter and they have sharp claws to get a good grip on the rocks when they are feeding on the algae.

The waved albatrosses are interesting because they do not touch land anywhere else in the world, except for the Galapagos. One reason for this is that they have no predators on the islands. The waved albatross also mates for life – the male builds the nest when he first arrives and awaits the female. Then they dance to recognize the male they mated with last year. The flightless cormorants gave up flying but are really good at deep diving – about 45/50 feet dives. They have no land predators, and therefore no need to fly away and there are good food sources in the water. The flightless cormorants filled an empty niche – they eat octopus and baby moray eels – so there is no need to fly long distance.

There are two types of Galapagos sea lion. The Galapagos sea lion's ancestor came from the north, probably California. While the fur seal's (actually a sea lion) ancestor came from south – probably Chile. The fur seals are smaller, with a longer face and pointed nose, and the position of their ears are different. Sea lions are much bigger, with a dog-like face. Sea lions and fur seals nurse their babies for two or three years. They are very good mothers. However, some time mothers never come back because they are eaten by orcas or sharks, so what happens to the babies? The baby seals are smart, they steal milk from other mothers. Then at about 6 months they can fish for themselves.

The Galapagos penguin is thought to have gotten to the islands via the Humboldt ocean current from the southern part of South America. They adapted to be much smaller. They are the only penguins on the equator and the smallest penguins on the planet. The young islands provided lava tubes for nesting – this insulates their eggs and makes survival at the equator possible for these penguins.