

Visit the Galapagos without leaving the state

EDITOR'S NOTE: Today the Daily Sound launches a new column called Backyard Santa Barbara. Karen Telleen-Lawton's Tuesday column is a mélange of local people, nature, events, and observations transporting the reader around the world and back to Santa Barbara. She is a local writer and the author of "Canyon Voices – the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon."

BY KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON
DAILY SOUND COLUMNIST

Not counting the planning time plus thousands of dollars in vacation costs, here's how you visit the Galapagos Islands: drive to Santa Barbara Airport, fly 100 miles to Los Angeles, change planes (tram from the satellite terminal), fly 3500 miles to Quito, Ecuador, taxi to the hotel (practice Spanish and maybe Quichua), spend the night, return to the airport, fly 800 miles west to Galapagos, bus to the harbor, board the boat, enjoy.

I can attest that it's a spectacular trip. Iguanas like rainbow-hued dwarf crocodiles sunbathe the beaches; Darwin's finches as famous as California Condors dot the skies. However, Galapagos naturalists pointed out that the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara are considered "The Galapagos of North America". Who would have guessed?

About 100,000 people per year do: they are the offshore visitors to Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and National Park (CINMS/CINP). Half a million visit if you include the Park Visitors' Center in Ventura. What do they know that we don't?

Many come just to glimpse the plethora of whales and dolphins; over one third of the world's species use our channel. Others travel to the pinniped rookeries on San Miguel Island: one of the world's largest and most diverse concentrations of seals and sea lions. Adventurers come to dive at Painted Cave, among the largest sea caves anywhere, or seek one of over 500 shipwrecks littering the channel.

For information on traveling to the Channel Islands, visit <http://www.nps.gov/chis/index.htm> or call Park Headquarters at (805) 658-5730.

Visitors encounter some of the 145 endemic species of plants and wildlife - species found nowhere else on earth. That's a tenth of the state's endemic species on a tenth of 1% of its land. The Channel Islands are not only beautiful, but a unique resource.

The Island Fox story overshadows many successes that CINMS/CINP has celebrated since getting serious about restoring the islands' health. In one project, researchers on Santa Cruz removed European beehives. Follow-up a decade later showed resurgence in natives like the green sweat bee and the Island Bush Mallow. The mallow and Hoffman's Rock Cress, a "Dr. Seuss-like" plant, are two of many species rebounding from near extinction with the concurrent eradication of pigs.

In 2002 the National Park finished removing black rats introduced by explorers beginning in the 17th century. One reward is a bumper crop of tiny, rare Xantus's Murrelets, an endearing ground-nesting bird that looks like a muddy snowball. Hatching success in sea caves on Anacapa Island has nearly doubled post-eradication.

If you visit San Nicholas, in the southern chain, you'll hear about Juana Maria, the 18th century Chumash who lived alone for 18 years. Her story inspired Scott O'Dell's classic "Island of the Blue Dolphins." Events currently around town — from symphonies to the "Santa Barbara Reads" selection to archeology lectures commemorate her story.

One draw to the southern Galapagos is a gawky-looking bird, the blue-footed boobie. You won't see blue-footed boobies in our Channel, but you might see the largest animal ever to have lived: the blue whale. Whatever your goals, you'll want to bring your camera phone, blue-toothed or not.

Question or comments? E-mail Karen at backyard@santabarbarafree.com