

## **The Predators of the Galapagos Islands:**

The Galapagos Islands are of geologically recent origin, the oldest islands are 5 million years old and the most recent only 2 million years old. The location is remote and the islands are in the middle of “nowhere”! They are located in the Pacific Ocean 600 miles off the west coast of Ecuador. The life forms and species of the islands are those that can fly over to such a far off place or those brought by humans.

The human introduced species, such as donkeys, pigs, rabbits, rodents, dogs and cats. These became feral, and were destroying native species. Now, they are being eradicated slowly. Fortunately humans did not venture into all of the islands and the ones most affected are San Cristobal, Santa Cruz and Isabella. Floreanna has a large feral donkey population; donkey scat was seen repeatedly as we hiked in the woods to catch a glimpse of land iguanas and finches and mockingbirds.

This article is about 3 of the predators which are endemic to the Galapagos Islands;

- 1) The magnificent Frigate Birds
- 2) The Galapagos Hawk
- 3) The Galapagos short eared Owl

The Magnificent Frigate Bird:

These are seabirds and are found in the shore lines of all of South America and also on the Galapagos Islands. They are large powerful fish eating birds. The adults are strong flyers and can easily cover 200 to 300 miles a day without stopping to rest or settling on land. The Frigates roost, nest and raise their single chick a year on the islands that do not have the Galapagos Hawks. This is because the hawks will predate upon the eggs and young chicks of the frigate birds.





The Magnificent Frigate birds obtain 30% of her food by fishing and the other 70% by stealing from other birds. It is amazing how the fast and determined the frigates are and often they steal from juvenile boobies who are just learning to dive for fish and have not yet mastered swallowing the fish before emerging from the water. They are easy targets for the fast strong predatory frigates.

The Galapagos Hawk:

The Galapagos hawk is the apex predator in the Galapagos Islands and there are no predators that can take on the hawks. The hawks are found on all the islands except Floreanna and Genovese islands. The Galapagos Hawk belongs to the family Buteo Galapagoensis. It is believed that some of the Swainson's Hawks that migrate annually from Northwest America to Argentina in South America got off course and ended up in the Galapagos Islands, and were naturalized there to become the Galapagos Hawks.

The Galapagos Hawks are unafraid, perching low on tree limbs or on lava rock outcroppings and approach anything that excites their curiosity. The hawks even approach people who are visiting the Islands in a casually curious manner. The hawks eat insects, lizards and small birds. In the Galapagos Islands the hawks also consume carrion and do eat dead birds and animals.



There are about 100 or 120 mating pairs of the Galapagos Hawks. As can be seen in the photograph the birds are banded and being studied by several biologists. According to the studies the Galapagos Hawks are the most recent arrivals to the Galapagos Islands and have been there 300,000 years. This is in comparison with the Darwin Finches which have been there for over 2 million years.

The Galapagos Hawks are polyandrous in their mating habits and several males mate with a single female. The usual number is one female to four males. All the males protect the nest, the chicks and assist in the feeding of the chicks.



The Galapagos Short Eared Owl:

The Galapagos Short Eared Owl belongs to the family Strigidae and the Latin name is *Asio Flammeus* ("the color of fire.") It is a medium sized owl weighing 15 to 16 ounces and measuring 15 to 17 inches in length. The owl has a big head with big eyes, a short neck and has a sharp curved black bill. The color is brown with barred wings and tail. The yellow iris is typical of the short eared owls. Short Eared owls are found in all continents except in the Antarctic.

The Galapagos Short Eared Owls are different from their brethren in all other areas. These owls are day hunters and they do not migrate. They are year round residents of the islands. Island owls eat insects such as grasshoppers, dragon flies and caterpillars. They eat small birds including small gulls, terns and flycatchers. Since they hunt during the daytime it is possible to occasionally see these gorgeous birds that are named for "the color of fire"

Short Eared Owls nest in low vegetation and females have one clutch a year of 2 to 4 eggs. The eggs hatch in 3 to 6 weeks and then the adults feed them for 4 more weeks and then the young are ready to fledge. At age one the juveniles are sexually ready to mate and reproduce.

