



Being a Daily Account of Life as a Marine Iguana on Various
Galápagos Islands
with Some Regard also to Tortoises and Finches,
and Not Forgetting the People

WEEK ONE

Prologue: Guayaquil, Ecuador
Sunday, November 1st, 2015

Stepping from the plane 36 hours after leaving the UK was somewhat of a relief. If only those iguanas knew what trouble I had gone through to get here and what a relief that was. Spending a couple of days in Guayaquil was necessary to recover.

It's a large city of 4 million and I climbed a hill known as Santa Ana, covered in houses and with 445 steps to the top, a kind of artists' colony and other types, to reach a working lighthouse and a church and to see the sprawl set out before me. It was not really a pretty sight and there did not seem to be much greenery between or in the streets. The skyline was punctuated by the most incredibly ugly tall building, offices apparently, which twisted slightly as it rose, each alternate floor being black or white, making it look like a reject twisted candy bar. I was always puzzled why designers wanted to slap an ugly building up in the middle of stuff that had no possible sympathy with it and that no-one complained or tried to prevent it and, worst of all, no-one even noticed it being out of place. A trip to London, England, would confirm that, as it is now full of weird shaped incompatible buildings completely out of context with each

other, as if at last the architects could go mad as the planning laws were relaxed.

Still, the people were nice and it was a whole new Latin experience. Music wafted up the many steps and it felt like party time. It seems like there's always party times in Guayaquil.

Monday, November 2nd

And the obligatory trip to Iguana Park (Parque Seminario). This was a small town square with a bandstand, statues including a pair of giant hairy wild pigs in bronze, and many excited tourists who were delighted in seeing these reptiles on every tree, on the grass, on the ground and sometimes appearing from dusty holes in the earth. They were here before the city, and they were left in situ and the city got built around them. This is very interesting actually: the photos below are each of a different iguana. As you can see, they all look like each other; no variation. This would be because they are a colony cut off from others and have all bred with each other over the generations, and eventually have all become very alike.

Some females had obviously laid eggs as you could see a concave area below the ribs, and were still seen to be digging, presumably to cover their eggs.

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Four almost identical iguanas at Parque Seminario, Guayaquil

Later: Went to a back street cafe and ate beans and rice and chicken. It was wonderful. Really hospitable folk. The guy sitting opposite me, however, was a little drunk, native to here, lived in Miami, had a loud and

obnoxious accent and told me a lot about how to live in Guayaquil and not get killed. Keep to the north, he said, and you'll be alright. He ate and talked and ate and got up and left.

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Wednesday, November 4th

Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz, Galápagos, 'Darwin Beach'

Darwin: "The love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute of man."

Amblyrhynchus cristatus hassi
Noon, 29° C – 4 pm, 25° C

This is the beach behind the Charles Darwin Research Station. I don't know what the actual name of this beach or bay is, but I call it that for reference.

My first whole day here. Looked up high and low tide, but the times didn't correlate; I think they were for a different bay.... it was difficult to figure out an optimum time to observe iguanas in action, if action is the word for it. There are several stages in their day: get up, walk towards the sea, eat, crawl back, dry off, and go to sleep. From what I could tell, after an entire day, this happens twice a day as does the high and low tides.

However, November is mating time here, the males are reddish and blotchy, aggressive and pretty active. I often noted big reds sitting alone, and a few feet away were a group of females, big reds' harems.

Contrary to popular belief, these Marine Iguanas don't always dive into the sea to feed under water. If there is a beach covered with lava rocks, and it stretches a way out, then the lizards can graze on the algae out of the water. On the particular beach behind the Darwin Station, the tide goes way out and the algae can be seen. Hatchlings and two and three year-olds always graze out in the open, they are not capable of performing the diving methods used by older, heavier animals. They would probably get swept out to sea.

The places where there is no choice but to dive are those where the land ends in smallish cliffs and the sea comes up to those cliffs. The tide in such places may not go out far enough to expose any sort of beach. No option but to dive. I have yet to see how hatchlings would feed in these areas, but the sea splashes up

onto the rocks above, softening any algae growing. Hatchlings' normal method of grazing is to get near the tide's edge, and during the brief flow back before the next wave, they will dart in and eat and then pull back before the next wave. It seems the algae expands on contact with water and is easier to pull off. It dries out somewhat when exposed.

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Thursday, November 5th Same Darwin Beach, Noon, 31° C

Darwin: "I am not apt to follow blindly the lead of other men."

I saw a couple of medium-sized lizards splayed out, floating on the waves that were going in and out. They didn't seem to be doing anything so I am thinking that they just enjoy it. Do iguanas enjoy? Why not?

Finally figured out the tides here. Also the routine which, I suppose, will time-shift according to the tides. At high tide, no action, just basking, and especially to get nicely heated up for the sojourn into the water. Also, if this was the second tide then the basking is to dry off and re-heat. On this bay, behind the lava rocks lay succulent beds of *sessuvium*, which is where these marine lizards spend their nights, very luxuriant and comfortable.

So, the order of the day seems to be: wake up, get warm, and crawl to the water. If high tide, the heavier ones may dive and eat; if low tide, all sizes can graze on exposed, wet rocks. After eating: crawl to a rock to dry out and digest, sleep, wake up, and do it again. This would appear to be twice a day. Around 5 pm they crawl inland a little, to the *sessuvium* and by 5:30-6:00 pm it is bedtime and they magically vanish. I have got to know where some of them sleep, from last year's stay, and iguanas are, like us, creatures of habit. Each one has its own place of rest and I managed to find ones I knew, still resting in the same places, including this black and green-blotched one, medium-sized, that was colored unlike any of the others here, the others being red-blotched. He lived under a bush on the way to the bigger bay. He was also a loner I think, never any others around him.

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Friday, November 6th 10 am, Cooler

The lesson I learned today on a brief walk at the bay was that there was indeed action at high tide. I just sat for a few minutes on some rocks very near the splashing water, and a big red popped up, giant claws grabbing the rock, crawling out, wet and shiny, crawled along the smooth parts of the rock towards the greenery, and flopped down to dry off.

So I sat and watched him for a while, noticing that his spines had become floppy and were oriented towards both sides of his body. I also saw that the salt on his head had a greenish tinge to it, which looked like the beast was going moldy but must have been from brushing against algae under water. You can just about see that in the photos below.



"Just out of the water."

I stayed half an hour, and when I left the lizard was still not dry.

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Saturday, November 7th
Port, 7am

Darwin: "An American monkey, after getting drunk on brandy, would never touch it again, and thus is much wiser than most men."

Don't know where to begin, really. I walked to the port early, bought a ticket to Floreana, had coffee, found the boat, and went on board. We took off. Boy, was it rough.

It was a small boat and it flew like the wind, noisy as a truck, bouncing and slapping the waves. I was okay until halfway across. Next thing I knew I was on a couch in the medical center in Floreana, having had the worst seasickness since the trip on the Shedd Aquarium's 'Coral Reef' to Miami from Nassau some years ago (thanks, Chuck). I was with a friend from Quito and she said I passed out sometime into the trip and they kept reviving me but eventually gave up. I was practically carried off the boat, put on the back of a truck and whizzed off to the medical center. I was dehydrated and had to rest quite a while, but they finally let me go. I ate some bread and apples and walked back down the hill to the beach., feeling better but weak.

Floreana, Cloudy, 1 pm, 26° C

I couldn't help being struck by the familiarity of the place. It was somewhat like the small settlements in the less populated islands of The Bahamas, a few buildings here and there making up the main street: a church, school, clinic, and what looked like a well-kept house that was a restaurant, clean and welcoming. I saw a 'store'. This was stuck between two other buildings and it sold not very much: Snickers bars and Magnum ice creams on a stick, baseball hats with Lonesome George logos or 'Floreana', cornflakes, tuna in cans, matches. It was a sparse life here but the people looked happy.

The concrete docks had large male iguanas splayed out flat on the ground plus the occasional sleeping female sea lion. Later I met the male sea lion face-to-face on the rocks – that was a surprise as it was behind me and I didn't see it until it grunted. It was bigger than me.

Now, the story of the community on the beach and the rocks. There, the scene was laid out before me. A genuine iguana village, with

small enclaves or families or whatever name you would like to give it. I sat there for a good two hours or more, and watched:

...charcoal-grey lumpy lava rocks with red blobs here and there, some red and green blobs too. The Floreana Iguana Bosses, in full mating regalia, and their harems. A community of creatures with their code of living: the neighbours, the managers, the Bosses, and what I call the Bossboss. Rules are applied, rules that were not voted in, dictated by the Bosses, who appeared to answer to the Bossboss.

Here's how I perceived that it worked: the bigger the male, the higher up on a rock he was. I could see that plainly. The biggest one in this community was quite magnificent, with a lot of green in the body.



Bossboss, the king of Floreana iguanas, no harem.

On another island, Española, during the mating season, this green is quite pronounced turquoise.

This green Bossboss really was the king of them all. No other iguana was resting near him. Many of the bosses were only a couple of rocks away from each other, but this guy was alone and majestic, like the King of Siam.

I saw that there was also a hierarchy of lower Bosses. The bigger the boss, the higher up on the rock he sat. Every now and then, an upper and a lower boss would nod furiously at each other. This is always fascinating, but after a while I realised there was a pattern to this. I thought I had made a mistake on this, but I kept re-checking. One would start to nod and then snort, and the other would do the same. At every juncture, after three seconds, an initial snort would come. It was, really, three seconds each time, so was part of the ritual. I counted it over and over. Therefore, these snorts are specifically snorted! They snort at each other on purpose. They also snort at any other time, but those are maybe more like a sneeze, when they can no longer

hold the liquid in their nasal passages. Is this a revelation? I don't know if anyone has written this before.



Other Bosses, with their harems.

The nodding displays were varied. If two lizards were more than about 2 m apart, they occasionally glanced at each other and gave nods. Any nearer and this turned into the rapid nod/3-second snorts display. This always happened. It was uniform throughout the community. I would like to see this on other islands and to observe it on , Beach, if it happens at all.

During all this time, the grey lava-colored clumps of females did nothing but lay around near their Boss, moving only occasionally. There were usually five or six of them, sometimes two and three year-olds clinging on to their backs like kids' teddy-bear knapsacks.

It was also true to say that the Bossboss did not appear to have any female groups around him and I wondered if that was because he was a free agent and could have the pick of whomever he wanted.

After: on the way back to the dock, I came across that sea lion I mentioned. Here he is, below:



Male sea lion scratching, on Floreana, Galápagos.

I talked to the locals here at the docks. The iguanas here will eat crab shells, and the dead crab inside if it is still there; I saw one eating crab legs. They also hang around female sea lions who are giving birth as they eat the placenta. I didn't see that, but I did see an iguana with vegetation that was not algae hanging out of its mouth. Nothing is cut and dried it seems.

The overall picture I got from the day was that this is indeed a little community here, which I could not observe on Darwin Beach and maybe that was because that beach is so much bigger and sprawling and that maybe it is the same there but I just didn't see it. I did see, however, that each pocket of a group appeared to be in its own permanent place, and used the spaces under and between the rocks as daytime caves of respite. I could not see where they went to sleep later in the day (to sleep for the night) as I had to leave in the middle of the afternoon.

I must return here and stay overnight to see other groups further along the coast. The species here is never mentioned with the three names when I read about it, it is just *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*. I can't find the intraspecific anywhere and am wondering how much investigation has been done. When I make a drawing of this lizard and compare the head scales, perhaps they will turn out to be different. It just puzzles me that it doesn't have three names, and that it is not listed on the Red List site.

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END WEEK ONE