

# I Love Boobies

*A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life.*

—Charles Darwin

As I write, my wife and I are returning from a fascinating 8 days exploring the Galápagos Islands aboard the grand ship *Endeavour* on one of its last voyages. This trip was the final item on my bucket list and is highly recommended for all who seek a unique adventure.



Blue-footed booby on North Seymour Island in the Galápagos Islands  
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The Galápagos Islands are a cluster of volcanic eruptions located about 2 hours by air off the coast of Guayaquil, Ecuador. This is where Charles Darwin formed his theory of evolution after observing the wildlife. We hiked on volcanic rocks, snorkeled, kayaked, and viewed the most remarkable display of creatures imaginable. What was truly impressive was that they were in

no way intimidated by our presence. Sea lions frolicked by us on the beaches and even swirled among us as we snorkeled near the shoreline or in the deep water. The animals would pose patiently as a gaggle of Canons, Nikons, and iPhones captured their images. Thousands of marine and land iguanas were everywhere, and colorful little lizards darted about.

In the ocean depths, we marveled at sharks, rays, turtles, and countless other species of marine life. We visited a farm in the migratory path of the giant Galápagos tortoises (*galápagos* is an old Spanish word for tortoise), some weighing hundreds of pounds, who can live for a century or more. Innumerable pelicans sat, strutted, flew, or dove to catch fish that slid slowly down their gullet with an impressive bulge. The male frigate bird inflated its red chest to attract a mate. We also saw the endangered finches that Darwin described in such detail (and whose continuous and rapid evolution is elaborated upon in the marvelous 1994 book *The Beak of the Finch*, by Jonathan Weiner), herons, red-billed tropicbirds, mockingbirds, and many others. Small penguins perched on the rocks or slowly slid into the water in their formal attire.



High on my list of marvels to see on this journey were the blue-footed boobies. If you are lucky, you will see these charming little web-footed characters dancing about. However, we only occasionally caught a glimpse of one or two of them flying overhead, diving for food, or merely watching us sail by from high up on a cliff. On our final hike, we encountered more than a dozen red-footed boobies, several of which were nesting. One of the birds proudly displayed her egg to us.

Nowhere was tolerance of the presence of humans more notable than at a small waterside seafood market where, as the fish were being scaled and deboned, a collection of pelicans waited for an occasional treat to be thrown their way. A young sea lion stood erect between the workers at the counter, as if it were a family pet. This scene was a high point of the trip.

But nature is not all beauty. This season the iguanas were smaller than usual, and some were found lying dead. Several baby penguins looked as if they would soon perish. A baby sea lion wandered the beaches alone, crying because it was unable to find its mother. We were viewing the decline of numerous species that are endangered, as described in *Last Chance to See*, by Douglas Adams (known for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). Whether it is the result of natural predators, the worst El Niño in recent history, or just natural selection, the blue-footed boobies and the other animals are decreasing in numbers and sadly may be seen only in photographs in another generation or two. Will my granddaughters ever be able to view such creatures with their own eyes?

As the quote attributed to Darwin on the back of my new T-shirt reads, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one most responsive to change." It is clearly not just these animal species of the Galápagos the quote refers to.

Until next month . . .

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Bruce D. Cheson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bruce D. Cheson, MD