

Galapagos Tortoise

West of Ecuador and engulfed in the Pacific Ocean, a volcanically active archipelago is located around 600 miles from the mainland. The cluster of 13 islands, positioned on the equator, are well-known as the Galapagos and they are home to some of Earth's most fascinating creatures: many species of living things found here are endemic as they cannot be sighted anywhere else on our planet. Despite all 13 islands having similar environments and temperate climates, the same species of creatures have not been sighted on all land masses across the Galapagos which is surprising due to their close proximity. Charles Darwin – a famous naturalist, biologist and geologist who visited the Galapagos in 1835 – discovered that this was largely due to how each species had adapted to their environments and the diets which were available to them within each island's habitat.

Throughout the Galapagos islands, the tortoise is one of the most evolved creatures: many different species of tortoise can be found across the 7 islands that they inhabit. The 20,000 tortoises found here today are believed to live for over 100 years and are strictly herbivores.

Remarkably, there are thought to be 10 different species of tortoises in this small area (a figure that has declined from an estimated 15 species that

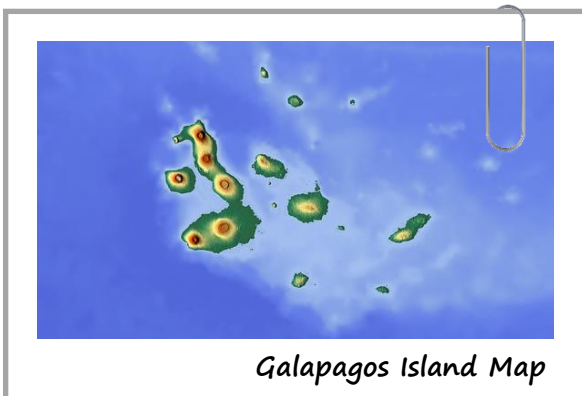


A Saddle-Shell Galapagos Tortoise

Darwin once observed). The main differences between the species focused upon the notable variations between their shells and necks because of adaptation.

Tortoises on the Galapagos islands have two distinctly different shells based upon their feeding habits needed on contrasting environments. Most commonly, tortoises in this region feature either a dome-shaped or a saddle-back shell to assist them. Tortoises with dome shells are found mostly in the humid elevated areas of the Galapagos, where there is plenty of lush vegetation within reach along with water and shade. Their shells are often rounded and they have shorter necks and limbs. On the other hand, tortoises with saddle-back shells are often found in low-lying areas of the Galapagos islands which are barren. The shape of their shells allows them to stretch their adapted lengthier necks to give them additional height they require to reach food in areas where vegetation is increasingly sparse.

Without adaptation and evolution, Galapagos tortoises would have become extinct many years ago had they not been able to successfully compete for food. As many species have dissipated over time, the remaining Galapagos tortoises are now vulnerable and are undergoing monitoring by conservationists.



Galapagos Island Map