

The Galápagos: A Natural History

By Henry Nicholls

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Charles Darwin called it “a little world within itself.” Sailors referred to it as “Las Encantadas”— the enchanted islands. Lying in the eastern Pacific Ocean, straddling the equator off the west coast of South America, the Galápagos is the most pristine archipelago to be found anywhere in the tropics. It is so remote, so untouched, that the act of wading ashore can make you feel like you are the first to do so.

Yet the Galápagos is far more than a wild paradise on earth—it is one of the most important sites in the history of science. Home to over 4,000 species native to its shores, around 40 percent of them endemic, the islands have often been called a “laboratory of evolution.” The finches collected on the Galápagos inspired Darwin's revolutionary theory of natural selection.

In *The Galápagos*, science writer Henry Nicholls offers a lively natural and human history of the archipelago, charting its course from deserted wilderness to biological testing ground and global ecotourism hot spot. Describing the island chain's fiery geological origins as well as our species' long history of interaction with the islands, he draws vivid portraits of the life forms found in the Galápagos, capturing its awe-inspiring landscapes, understated flora, and stunning wildlife. Nicholls also reveals the immense challenges facing the islands, which must continually balance conservation and everencroaching development.

Beautifully weaving together natural history, evolutionary theory, and his own experience on the islands, Nicholls shows that the story of the Galápagos is not merely an isolated concern, but reflects the future of our species' relationship with nature—and the fate of our planet.

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The Galápagos: A Natural History By Henry Nicholls Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #407001 in Books
- Published on: 2014-04-08
- Released on: 2014-04-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x .75" w x 6.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 224 pages

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Editorial Review

From Booklist
Nicholls' first visit to the Galápagos Islands changed his life and inspired his first book, Lonesome George (2006). In this biography of the treasured archipelago—the inspiration for Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and a UNESCO World Heritage Site—Nicholls explains why it's a perfect "testing ground" for the dream of sustainable development. In an enticingly structured, thoroughly enjoyable, rolling narrative, he discusses the islands' volcanic origins, native flora and fauna, and human explorers and residents. He also describes with firsthand excitement and surprising detail what it's like to be in the presence of the islands' remarkably tame wildlife, from the playful red-footed boobies to Pacific green turtles and the enormous tortoises for which the archipelago is named and which were slaughtered to the brink of extinction. Nicholls tracks growing acceptance of the need to preserve the islands' "ecological integrity" versus fierce opposition to conservation efforts. It remains to be seen if lucrative tourism will ensure the islands' protection or pose a threat. There is no question, as Nicholls eloquently reveals, that we all have a stake in protecting the Galápagos. --Donna Seaman

Review
"*The Galápagos* is an engaging, informative introduction to the natural history of the archipelago. Charles Darwin's observations and insights on the Galápagos are effectively used to highlight key aspects of the archipelago's terrestrial and marine environments, the unique plants and animals they support, and how our understanding of them has evolved since his historic visit. The book also gives an accurate account of the current challenges facing Galápagos, and how they are being addressed. A surprising amount of information is packed into this concise and entertaining overview. An inspiring pre-travel read for anyone considering a visit to 'Darwin's Islands'."
—K. Thalia Grant and Gregory B. Estes, authors of *Darwin in Galapagos*

"In his new natural history, Henry Nicholls transforms the Galápagos archipelago from perennial example to subject. Chapters devoted to geology, plants, animals, and insects finally provide a landscape framework for some of biology's most famous stories—from Darwin's finches to the giant tortoises that give the islands their name. Nicholls also includes a welcome and thoughtful discussion of the archipelago's most recent and transformative arrivals, its people."
—Thor Hanson, author of *Feathers* and *The Impenetrable Forest*

"Henry Nicholls has turned his most observant eye on the remarkable, but less often described human history of Galápagos. The future of the islands and their distinctive biota will be in the hands of the national lawmakers and growing number of Galápagos residents as the isolation enjoyed by Galápagos becomes a distant memory. In his lively prose, Henry lauds the unsung scientists and conservation managers who work doggedly and successfully on persistent wildlife management challenges wrought by human accident or design. His persistent focus on stewardship—man's absolute responsibility to nature—is refreshing and important in the world of natural history literature. A thoughtfully executed and excellent read."
—Johannah Barry, president of the Galapagos Conservancy

"If you read one book about the Galápagos, make sure it is this. Thoroughly researched, highly informative, lively, and enjoyable, each page is a real pleasure to read. Whether a first time visitor or an old Galápagos 'hand,' Henry Nicholls's *The Galápagos* should accompany you on any physical or virtual trip to these Enchanted Islands".
—Ian Dunn, chief executive officer, Galapagos Conservation Trust

“Nicholls describes the natural life of the Galapagos with both knowledge and zest: its rocks, the ocean and the sea life that surround it, its seabirds (including the ‘famously small' Galapagos penguin), its plants, its invertebrates, its land birds…and its reptiles…. The human element is a big part of the Galapagos story too, not only Darwin but also that of naval officers, explorers, privateers and, later, conservationists…. The book is a fascinating portrait of the archipelago's natural and human history.”
—Chicago Tribune

“*The Galápagos: A Natural History* is a book that should be on the reading table of all those interested not only in the natural history of the Galápagos Islands but by everyone who wishes to expand their perspective upon the subject of natural history itself – as well as, of course – those who simply enjoy reading interesting and well-written books in general.”
—The Well-read Naturalist

“Anyone planning or just dreaming of a trip to the famed islands will get a preview of their natural history in this engaging volume.”
—Science News

“[A] thoroughly engaging and deftly distilled primer on the Galapagos Islands. From rocks to ocean, seabirds, plants, invertebrates, land birds, reptiles, and humans…[Nicholls] weaves the history of discovery in Galapagos with eyewitness reports, the ecology and evolution of the archipelago and conservation challenges – all in just 150 pages…. [F]or a succinct overview of the islands, their history, nature and import, the book is admirable.”
—Longitude Books blog

“A readable introduction to the natural history of the Galapagos Islands.”
—Birdbooker Report

“In an enticingly structured, thoroughly enjoyable, rolling narrative, [Nicholls] discusses the islands' volcanic origins, native flora and fauna, and human explorers and residents. He also describes with firsthand excitement and surprising detail what it's like to be in the presence of the islands' remarkably tame wildlife, from the playful red-footed boobies to Pacific green turtles and the enormous tortoises for which the archipelago is named and which were slaughtered to the brink of extinction.... There is no question, as Nicholls eloquently reveals, that we all have a stake in protecting the Galápagos.”
—Booklist

“With pink iguanas and blue-footed boobies (not to mention red-footed ones that like to hide toy plastic bassoons and other jetsam in their hilltop nests), the islands are a carnival of amazing beings that somehow thrive in a place that has reminded visitors (from a 15th-century Spanish bishop to Herman Melville) of a slag heap or the gates of hell. Henry Nicholls introduces and celebrates these wonders and more in seven short chapters covering the geology, ocean life, seabirds, plants, invertebrates, land birds and reptiles of the archipelago. Three more explore the human impact and the hope that Nicholls and others have for the islands' future.”
***—The Guardian* (UK)**

“The tale of the Galapagos's solitary giant tortoise and conservation icon was told to great effect by Henry Nicholls in *Lonesome George*. Sadly, George died in 2012, but happily Nicholls is back with an account that shows why the archipelago that shaped Darwin's ideas still matters to us.”
***—New Scientist*, 2014 books preview**

“In choosing his topics, Nicholls does what he calls ‘some cherry-picking' and the result is both entertaining and enlightening.... Nicholls navigates [the] complex issues [related to the human population] with care, sensitivity and honesty.”
—Galápagos Digital

“Tourists should read this book before they visit the Galápagos. In a relaxed and conversational style, Henry Nicholls introduces many of the animals and plants that live there, explains why so many are strange and unusual, and shows how natural history has been first shaped by geological history and then influenced by human history. The book is an inspiring call to visit the islands, to experience the animals and plants in the sea and on land, and to join in conserving them.”
—Peter Grant, Professor Emeritus, Princeton University, and coauthor of *40 Years of Evolution: Darwin's Finches on Daphne Major Island*

“Nicholls's book is filled with fascinating natural history tales, from volcanically-heated seas melting the resin that holds a ship together to encounters with foot-long centipedes, and also includes a sobering, but ultimately hopeful account of the efforts to conserve the archipelago's flora and fauna. It's a book you'd want to read on a plane flight to the Galápagos. It's also a book that will make you want to book that flight.”
—Alan de Queiroz, author of *The Monkey's Voyage*

“This is the perfect book to take with you if you are planning a trip to the Galápagos. Even if you are not, this is an enchanting and enlightening account of the most scientifically significant islands in the world.”
—Tim Birkhead, author of *Bird Sense*

“Henry Nicholls has added an informative, fun, and up-to-date read to the Galápagos literature. By sprinkling his discussion of the geology, biology, and history of the islands with quotes from historical figures, including Darwin, the Bishop of Panama, Herman Melville, and many others, he takes the reader on a unique journey of discovery of the wonders of Galápagos. He merges historical information with up-to-date science and conservation, then brings the reader back to the sites and species they will see when visiting the islands. Most importantly, he discusses why Galápagos matters and the challenge to all of us to ensure its long-term protection.”
—Linda J. Cayot, science advisor, Galapagos Conservancy

“[A]n accessible introduction to the islands' natural history.... [Nicholls'] writing is always skillfully rendered and his enthusiasm for the islands, where he has spent much time, is palpable.... [T]his book is a solid addition to the existing literature on the Galápagos. A pleasant, anecdotal work, it will delight armchair travelers and tourists hoping to maximize their own trips to these magical islands.”
—Library Journal

“A fascinating overview of the natural and human history of this remarkable archipelago, from prehistoric times to the present.”
—Kirkus Reviews

"I have been to the Galapagos five times, including an extended private expedition retracing Darwin's footsteps in these magnificent islands that so inspired his insights into the evolutionary process. I thought I knew everything about the islands until I read Henry Nicholls's *The Galapagos*, the best single-volume work I've found and the perfect guide for travelers. Every visitor to the islands should be given a copy of this marvelous natural history to read in order to fully appreciate the richness of one of the most important pieces

of real estate on the planet. A captivating book."
—Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, and author of *Why Darwin Matters*

“Mr. Nicholls, entertaining in his own light, keeps things lively with lots of human observations.... As protective as Mr. Nicholls is of these strange islands, the reader gets the distinct feeling that he wants you to see for yourself these animals that ‘show no prejudice, no fear' – an experience that will do no less than ‘transform the way we think about our place in the world.”
—The New York Times

“In this natural and human history of Darwin's living laboratory, Henry Nicholls surfs from geology, oceanography and marine biology to resident land species, not least the burgeoning population of Homo sapiens. Throughout, he intertwines key accounts such as Darwin's inspired musings on geological uplift and the piscine encounters of pioneer diver William Beebe. One for the scientific islomane with a sense of the bigger picture.”
—Nature

About the Author

Henry Nicholls is the author of *Lonesome George*, which was shortlisted for the 2007 Royal Society Book Prize, and *The Way of the Panda*. He writes regularly for *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *BBC Focus*, and *BBC Wildlife*, and he writes the Animal Magic blog for the *Guardian*. Nicholls lives in London.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Pearl Moore:

Nowadays reading books be than want or need but also be a life style. This reading routine give you lot of advantages. The advantages you got of course the knowledge your information inside the book this improve your knowledge and information. The information you get based on what kind of guide you read, if you want attract knowledge just go with knowledge books but if you want feel happy read one together with theme for entertaining for instance comic or novel. The actual The Galápagos: A Natural History is kind of reserve which is giving the reader unstable experience.

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