

GALÁPAGOS

POST

SUMMER 2026

THE SEASON OF HOMECOMING

The Day the Giants Returned
A Flash of Vermilion on the Volcano
Weathering El Niño



Galápagos
Conservancy
galapagos.org

FROM THE DESK OF HUGO MOGOLLÓN



Dear Friends,

Earlier this year, as we prepared for the historic release of giant tortoises on Floreana Island, Dr. James Gibbs shared with our team the field notes he wrote more than 25 years ago when he first encountered the unusual saddle-backed tortoises on Wolf Volcano. Reading those notes has been one of the highlights of this year. It was a reminder that the work we do today is often part of a chain reaction set in motion by discoveries made a generation ago.

This issue of our magazine reflects that reality. We continue the story of the return of giant tortoises to Floreana and share James' perspective on the journey that helped make that moment possible. You will discover how wildlife cameras are helping us better understand one of the world's rarest reptiles, the pink iguana, and learn about new discoveries emerging from the field, from a little-known snake on Isabela to the majestic Brujo Flycatchers.

I am especially excited to share stories that reflect our team's ongoing efforts to restore petrel populations and protect the last remaining population of Sierra Negra tortoises. These achievements are built on long days in difficult terrain, weeks spent in remote field camps, and countless hours collecting the information needed to better understand and protect these species.

At the same time, we are carrying out this work in a rapidly changing world. Our feature on El Niño explores how a warming climate may affect the delicate balance that sustains life in Galápagos, and why building resilient ecosystems is becoming increasingly important.

You will also meet some of the people who make this work possible — from educators learning from local fishers to supporters whose generosity allows conservation efforts to continue across the archipelago.

Thank you for being part of this work. Together, we are investing not only in the future of individual species, but in the future of one of the most extraordinary places on Earth.



With gratitude,

Hugo Mogollón
President & CEO
Galápagos Conservancy

INVEST IN CONSERVATION

Your gift provides flexible support where it is needed most, allowing Galápagos Conservancy to respond to emerging conservation challenges and invest in the highest-priority opportunities to protect the unique biodiversity of the Galápagos Islands.

Your generosity helps make conservation work like this possible:

PROTECT CRITICAL HABITATS



Support the infrastructure and field operations that enable our staff and park rangers to protect some of the archipelago's most remote and ecologically important landscapes, including areas such as Wolf Volcano.

ADVANCE SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY



Help scientists and conservationists conduct field expeditions that expand our understanding of the islands and inform effective conservation action.

POWER CONSERVATION INNOVATION

Support new technologies that allow researchers and park managers to monitor wildlife, track ecosystem health, and collect the data needed to guide conservation decisions.



HELP SAVE ENDANGERED SPECIES

Your support contributes to habitat restoration, invasive species management, and species recovery efforts that bring iconic Galápagos wildlife back from the brink of extinction.



MORE WAYS TO GIVE

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Recommend a grant from your donor-advised fund to support Galápagos Conservancy's mission.

IRAs

If you are age 70½ or older, you may be able to make tax-free charitable gifts directly from your IRA through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD).

Gifts of Appreciated Assets

Galápagos Conservancy welcomes gifts of stock, Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs), charitable trusts, savings bonds, and other assets that help advance our mission.

Leave a Legacy

Include Galápagos Conservancy in your estate plans to help ensure the long-term protection of the Galápagos Islands for generations to come.



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THE DAY THE GIANTS RETURNED

Hundreds of years ago, giant tortoises blanketed the island of Floreana, which has an ample supply of fresh water and supported an amazing amount of biodiversity.

Its abundance proved its undoing. Whalers and sailors stopping in Galápagos in the 18th and 19th centuries favored the island as a port to collect food and drinking water. One of their main food supplies were Floreana giant tortoises (*Chelonoidis niger*), highly prized for their meat, and thousands upon thousands were captured over the years.

By the mid 1800s, the Floreana tortoise had become extinct.

Gardeners of Galápagos return to Floreana

This February, 158 tortoises returned to Floreana for the first time in over 180 years.

For Dr. James Gibbs, Galápagos Conservancy's vice president of science and conservation, the event marked a moment 26 years in the making. In the year 2000, Gibbs and a group of researchers discovered the hybrid Floreana tortoise surviving amongst a group of Isabela tortoises at Wolf Volcano.

Through careful genetic screening and selective captive breeding, Galápagos Conservancy, along with the Galápagos National Park Directorate and collaborators, have since hatched more than 700 of these tortoises for reintroduction to Floreana. Additional juveniles will join the population released in February when they are between five and seven years old, ensuring their best chance of survival in natural ecosystems.

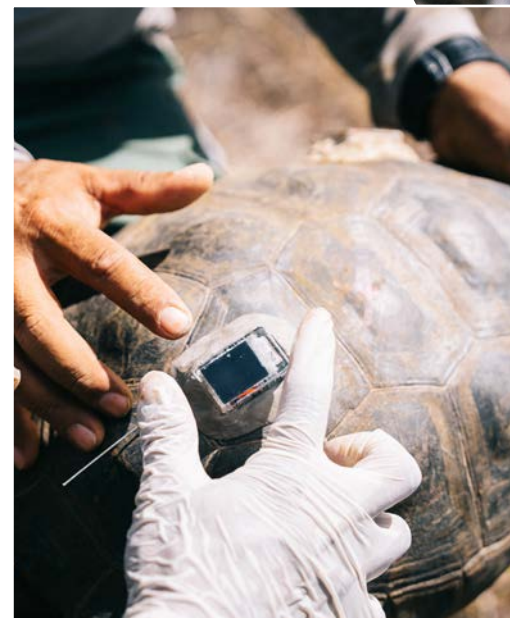
The initial release intentionally coincided with Galápagos' rainy season, when vegetation is at peak abundance. This ensured that the young tortoises would have ample forage as they adjusted to the island. Over time, as they grow and multiply, these tortoises will help restart ecological processes that disappeared after tortoises went extinct on Floreana. As prolific grazers, they shape vegetation through feeding and trampling, while also dispersing seeds and supporting processes that benefit other species.

Researchers also fitted each tortoise with a lightweight GPS transmitter before release, enabling scientists to monitor their movements, check on their wellbeing, and add to the ever-growing body of knowledge about these animals.

The power of commitment and collaboration

Floreana isn't just the first chapter of a success story. It's a real and tangible example of what can be achieved through large-scale ecological collaboration. The broader project is being led by the Galápagos National Park Directorate with the support of several additional partner organizations.

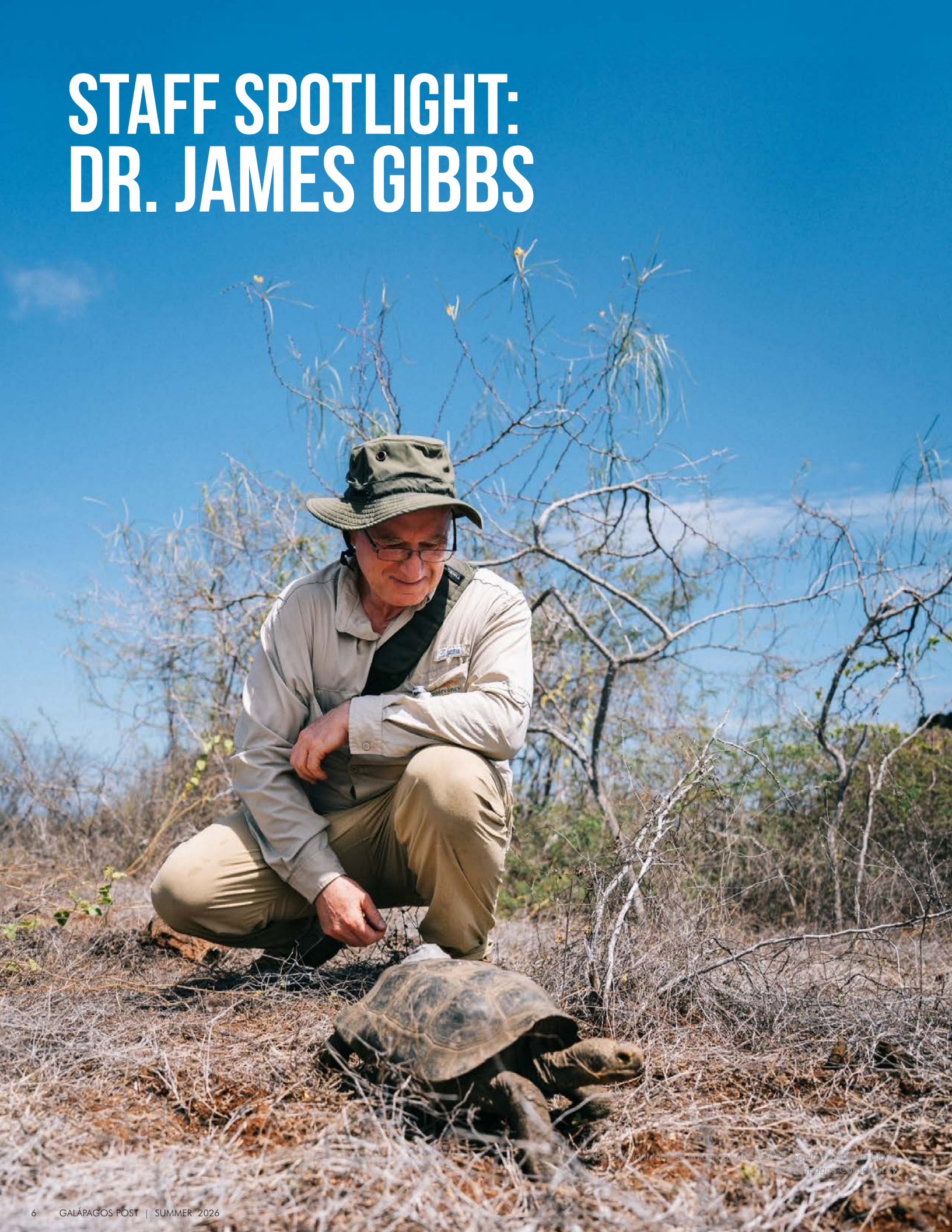
But for many, the sight of giant tortoises once again moving across Floreana represents something even larger than successful scientific collaboration. It's a manifestation of something once thought nearly impossible — bringing an extinct species back home.



Above: Floreana hybrid giant tortoise on Floreana island; below left: Floreana hybrid tortoise hatchlings at the Santa Cruz Breeding Center; below right: Wolf Volcano giant tortoise with Floreana tortoise genes
© Galápagos Conservancy



STAFF SPOTLIGHT: DR. JAMES GIBBS



James Gibbs didn't know what he was getting into when he spotted an odd-looking tortoise near Wolf Volcano 26 years ago. He and a team of researchers were at the tail end of a decade-long project compiling the first comprehensive survey of giant tortoises on every Galápagos island. Near the volcano's base, they came across a large group of tortoises. But some of them looked...out of place, almost as if they were a different species. Years later, testing confirmed — they were descendants of the Floreana giant tortoise.

In February of this year, tortoises returned to Floreana for the first time. We sat down with Gibbs to ask about the journey that led to this momentous moment in conservation.

Why is the reintroduction of Floreana tortoises so remarkable?

Bringing tortoises back to Floreana is huge for a number of reasons. First, they're the megafauna people associate with Galápagos; they're iconic, and so is their return. Second, they're a key first ecological step of a much broader conservation plan to bring a whole suite of species back to Floreana.

How did you determine that they were Floreana descendants?

A lot of time and genetic testing, then more testing. When we first discovered the tortoises, the technology didn't even exist to determine their origin. It took nearly six years for our colleagues at Yale to develop the genetic testing techniques. And then the results kept repeating; some of the tortoises on Isabela were testing with a nearly 70%, 80% quotient of Floreana DNA. From there we started a captive breeding program, and the tortoises just thrived in it.

How did you become interested in conservation, particularly in Galápagos?

The way many people do, I think. I grew up running around in the woods in very rural Maine, so I got very accustomed to the

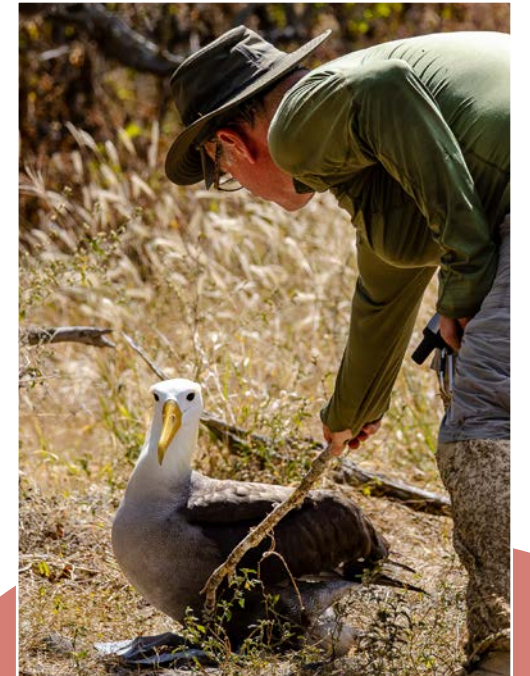
flora and fauna around me. As I got older, I started seeing the impacts of ecosystem degradation in my own backyard.

My connection to Galápagos starts with my father. He accidentally visited the Galápagos over 60 years ago while en route to Easter Island to provide medical care. His ship ran out of water, and they stopped in the archipelago to reload. He fell in love with Galápagos and would tell us stories about it all the time.

What's one thing people should know about conservation science these days?

That it works. It might seem a little simplistic to say, but with so much disheartening information in the news cycles these days I think it's easy to forget that you can actually save species you see disappearing. It may not be tomorrow, it may not be easy, but every day we invest in conservation science means another opportunity like the Floreana release awaits in the future.

Opposite: Dr. James Gibbs during the 2026 Floreana tortoise release; Top: Dr. Gibbs during an expedition on Española island; © Galápagos Conservancy; Below: Archival image of Dr. Gibbs on Wolf Volcano.



A SNAKESKIN, A CAMERA TRAP, AND A SCIENTIFIC SURPRISE

It started with a shed snakeskin discovered inside the crater of Wolf Volcano on Isabela Island. Then, fleeting images were captured by wildlife cameras. Finally, researchers and park rangers encountered and confirmed the presence of a species of snake suspected to be extinct in the area — the Western Galápagos racer (*Pseudalsophis occidentalis*).

While the Western racer has been sporadically documented in Galápagos, including on the southern part of Isabela, very little is known about the species. None had ever been documented in the northern part of the island near the volcano. Yet between 2024 and 2026, wildlife cameras originally installed to monitor the critically endangered pink iguanas on Wolf Volcano began to capture what appeared to be fleeting images of racers.

And in March 2026, Galápagos Conservancy researchers and park rangers encountered and documented a live juvenile racer in the crater of Wolf volcano.

“This new data substantially expands our knowledge of the distribution and status of the Western Galápagos racer,” said Jorge Carrión, Galápagos Conservancy’s director of science

and conservation and lead author of a scientific manuscript currently under review for publication that describes this important discovery.

Galápagos racers are among the archipelago’s least understood reptiles, he added. While they hunt a variety of smaller prey, including small lizards, rodents, and birds’ eggs, they are completely harmless towards humans.

The introduction of invasive species to many of the islands led to population decline for this already difficult-to-track animal. Predatory feral cat populations in particular have decimated many endemic reptile populations. Now the efforts to control rats and cats on Wolf Volcano may be helping other species, including the racers.

The finding emphasizes the importance of long-term monitoring in remote areas in Galápagos, where species such as the Western racer could still exist. Absence of evidence, as the researchers wrote in their paper, doesn’t always equal evidence of absence. There’s still much more to discover in the archipelago.

Archival image of the Western Galápagos racer. © Daniel Fitter

A FLASH OF VERMILION ON THE VOLCANO

A tiny bird once peppered the Galápagos Islands with bright spots of color: the Brujo Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus nanus*), whose males sport feathers of brilliant vermilion. But like many avian species in the archipelago, the introduction of invasive plants and animals (in particular, the avian vampire fly) caused the Flycatcher’s populations to rapidly dwindle and, in some cases, completely disappear.

But recently, our conservationists made a surprising discovery while searching a remote area for giant tortoises; a small breeding population of Brujo Flycatchers on the northern flank of the Cerro Azul Volcano on Isabela Island. They observed 19 individuals in total; 12 adult males, four females, and three nestlings.

While Flycatchers live on other parts of Isabela, it has been many years since they were spotted on Cerro Azul, where the species was termed possibly extinct.

But the discovery of this small population means that the birds no bigger than a bar of soap could have persisted, undocumented, for decades

on the volcano. The arid conditions and relatively low level of invasive plant species on the northern part of the volcano make it a promising long-term habitat for its tiny residents.

A potential partner in that conservation effort? A population of giant tortoises living in the northern flank of Cerro Azul. Flycatchers have been recorded feasting on the insects that get flushed out by giant tortoises moving through vegetation looking for leaves and grasses to eat; a symbiotic relationship that can only flourish further by implementing long-term conservation plans.

For now, Galápagos Conservancy experts will continue to monitor the Flycatcher population on Cerro Azul. Their findings were published in *The Journal of Field Ornithology* in late July of this year.

Brujo Flycatcher during an expedition on Isabela island. © Galápagos Conservancy



A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

Great strides have been made towards bringing back Galápagos giant tortoise species across the archipelago, and populations are slowly rebounding. But while the end goal is a life in the wild, one of the most successful wildlife recovery strategies is still hatching tortoise eggs and rearing the babies safely in captivity, for eventual release to the wild.

When a giant tortoise hatches in the wild, it faces overwhelming odds. Rats, pigs, dogs and other predators, both native and introduced, consume many hatchlings each breeding season. The survival rate for baby tortoises born in the wild may be as low as 5% in their first year.

That’s why each breeding season field crews comb a handful of islands looking for the distinctive tortoise nests. Female tortoises dig them deep, creating a flask-shaped chamber and depositing clutches of 5-20 eggs, then sealing them in with a mixture of soil, urine, and feces that forms a hard nest cap.

Once located, the nest must be carefully opened and the eggs removed delicately. Developing tortoise embryos are sensitive to agitation, so the eggs are marked and transported back to the breeding center with extreme care in the exact orientation in which they were found.

Back at breeding centers, the eggs are incubated and the young tortoises are raised until about five years of age before release back to the wild. The results are dramatic. In captivity, survival rates climb to roughly 85%, helping conservationists produce hundreds of young tortoises to accelerate the recovery of endangered populations throughout Galápagos. In fact, roughly one third of the 30,000 giant tortoises in the wild today in Galápagos were head-started in this manner. While the goal is to one day have enough tortoises that captive breeding is no longer necessary, it’s currently a crucial part of the species’ conservation.



Top: Walter Chimborazo and a park ranger collecting eggs. Bottom: Hatchling found during egg collection; Opposite: Eggs during an egg collection field trip on Santa Cruz island. © Galápagos Conservancy



A CONSERVATION BLUEPRINT FOR THE PINK IGUANA'S SURVIVAL

Saving a species, especially one as critically endangered as the pink iguana (*Conolophus marthae*), isn't an overnight process. Discovered in 1986 and formally described in only 2009, conservation efforts for this reptile found nowhere else in the world are still in their relative infancy. But big strides have been made in just a few short years.

In May, Galápagos Conservancy, Galápagos National Park Directorate, and the Jocotoco Foundation presented their latest research and findings on pink iguana conservation efforts to a group of researchers during a workshop.

The presentation outlined priorities and next steps to maximize conservation of the pink iguanas, which reside only on Wolf Volcano. At the top of the list: continuing invasive predators control programs and filling in information gaps about the iguanas. That includes learning more about the iguanas' habitat requirements, how, when and where they reproduce, and collecting baseline health data.

Researchers began by first locating the pink iguanas' nesting sites, where they made a pleasant discovery in the process — a burst of pink iguana hatchlings, suggesting that the existing population is successfully reproducing for the first time in decades.

Year-round monitoring using wildlife cameras is currently underway to help determine where the iguanas move. It also helps experts better understand the timing of their breeding seasons and how they are influenced by

environmental factors such as the time of year or changes to climate.

Researchers are also using the images captured by the cameras — more than nine million so far — to understand broader changes in the Wolf Volcano ecosystem. These records are helping document the decline of invasive predators, especially feral cats, while also revealing positive responses among other native species, including yellow iguanas, Darwin's Finches, snakes, and lava lizards.

"The workshop confirmed that we are moving from knowledge gaps to concrete conservation actions," says Adrián Cueva, field technician at Galápagos Conservancy, who is helping spearhead implementation of pink iguana conservation activities. "We now have stronger information about the ecology of and threats to the pink iguana. But this is only the beginning. The future of one of the rarest reptiles on Earth will depend on sustained fieldwork, long term monitoring, and continued commitment from everyone who believes Galápagos species can still be saved."

275 INDIVIDUALS
98% SURVIVAL RATE



Top: Walter Chimborazo, Roberto Jimenez monitoring pink iguanas; Bottom left: Dr. Jorge Carrión, Dr. James Gibbs and Max Jones along with partners during the pink iguana workshop; Bottom right: Our conservation team during the 2026 pink iguana workshop. © Galápagos Conservancy



THE COST OF A SINGLE MISSED SEASON

The Galápagos Petrel (*Pterodroma phaeopygia*) spends most of its time at sea. But once a year it returns to the islands to nest, laying a single egg in underground burrows dug into the flanks of islands' volcanoes. For decades, scientists have monitored the threat that invasive black rats, introduced by humans centuries ago, pose to petrel populations. The rodents have a voracious appetite for petrel hatchlings and are a direct contributor to the species' population decline.

A study led by our conservation team, published by bioRxiv in March of this year, found that controlling black rat populations is even more important than we thought — and even a single missed season can have devastating impacts.

By analyzing 25 years of monitoring data, researchers found that the Galápagos petrel has maintained very stable reproduction success through years where rat control programs were in place. On average, roughly two thirds of monitored nests successfully produced hatchlings.

Then came 2017.



That year, rodent control efforts were interrupted. And the impacts were immediate. Breeding success rates plummeted by nearly 40%, and the decline revealed just how dependent the species remains on active conservation.

"One year of management failure was enough to trigger a severe demographic decline," the authors wrote in the study.

The findings also shed light on when petrels are most vulnerable. Researchers believe rats primarily target eggs and very young chicks, creating a bottleneck early in the breeding cycle. Chicks that survive their first few weeks are much more likely to reach adulthood.

The findings arrive as conservationists across the globe grapple with the challenge of protecting island species from invasive predators. It is extremely difficult to eradicate rats on tropical islands such as the Galápagos, where warm temperatures and variable rainfall can allow rodent populations to rebound quickly.

Yet the research offers an encouraging takeaway: Perfection may not be necessary.

The data show that sustained annual control programs, even without eliminating rats entirely, help maintain high reproductive success.

For a species that lays only one egg each year per breeding pair, that consistency may make all the difference. And after a quarter-century of monitoring, the lesson is unmistakable: Conservation relies upon showing up year after year, ensuring that a single missed season doesn't become a permanent loss.

Top: Petrel flying above the ocean © Daniel Fitter; Bottom: Petrel hatchling on Isabela island. © Galápagos Conservancy



WHEN YOU TEACH A TEACHER TO FISH

Hundreds of teachers from across Galápagos gathered this spring to gain a new perspective on marine resource sustainability.

During the 2026 Galápagos Conservancy's Teacher's Institute, held April 20–24, every teacher in the archipelago met with artisanal fishers from the Galápagos Marine Reserve to learn about the realities of fishing in the archipelago.

Through discussions, personal testimonies, and tours, participants explored the challenges and opportunities facing local fishers and the role conservation plays in protecting both their livelihoods and marine ecosystems.

Fishers shared how their practices have evolved over the years, including through hands-on demonstrations on the water, and explained the importance of managing resources responsibly to ensure healthy oceans for future generations. For many educators, the experience offered valuable insight into the connection between

environmental stewardship, local culture, and community well-being.

One teacher from Santa Cruz Island described responsible fishing as the most important lesson she learned, noting that sustainable harvesting requires respecting species' reproductive cycles and protecting the environment while still meeting human needs.

The exchange is expected to have a lasting impact in classrooms across the islands. Beginning in June, teachers started incorporating the information they learned into their curricula; bringing real-world conservation challenges and community knowledge directly into their students' educational experiences, and helping build the next generation of ocean conservationists and ecosystem protectors.

Top: Teachers interacting with local fishermen during the 2026 Teacher's Institute; Bottom: View of the fish market on Santa Cruz island. © Galápagos Conservancy

WEATHERING EL NIÑO

Few places on Earth are as profoundly shaped by the ocean as the Galápagos Islands. The archipelago lies at the intersection of major Pacific currents that together create one of the most biologically distinctive ecosystems on the planet.

During much of the year, cold, nutrient-rich waters fuel marine productivity across the archipelago, sustaining abundant populations of sharks, seabirds, marine mammals, marine iguanas, and sea turtles.

During the warmer months, tropical waters lead to increased rainfall that stimulates plant growth across the archipelago, creating favorable conditions for giant tortoises, land iguanas, Darwin's finches, and many other terrestrial species. Over millions of years, life in Galápagos has evolved around this dynamic aquatic interplay.

Every few years, however, this balance is skewed by El Niño.

El Niño occurs when a large mass of warm water moves into the region and suppresses the upwelling of cold, nutrient-rich

waters that sustain the islands' marine food web. Ocean temperatures rise, marine productivity declines, and rainfall increases.

During the major El Niño events of 1982–83 and 1997–98, populations of many marine species decreased sharply in Galápagos. Food became scarce for seabirds and sea animals. Blue-footed booby, Galápagos penguin, and flightless cormorant populations collapsed. Sea lion and marine iguana numbers dwindled. The Galápagos damselfish, a small reef fish found only in the archipelago, disappeared entirely.

Scientists are watching the eastern tropical Pacific with increasing concern this year, as data indicate a high probability that El Niño conditions will develop and persist into 2027. This would occur in a Pacific Ocean that is already storing unprecedented amounts of heat. For Galápagos, where marine productivity depends on a delicate balance between warm and cold water, that could amplify ecological impacts throughout the food web.

El Niño cannot be prevented. However, healthy ecosystems are generally more resilient to environmental disturbance. This is why long-term conservation remains essential to buffering Galápagos' ecosystems.

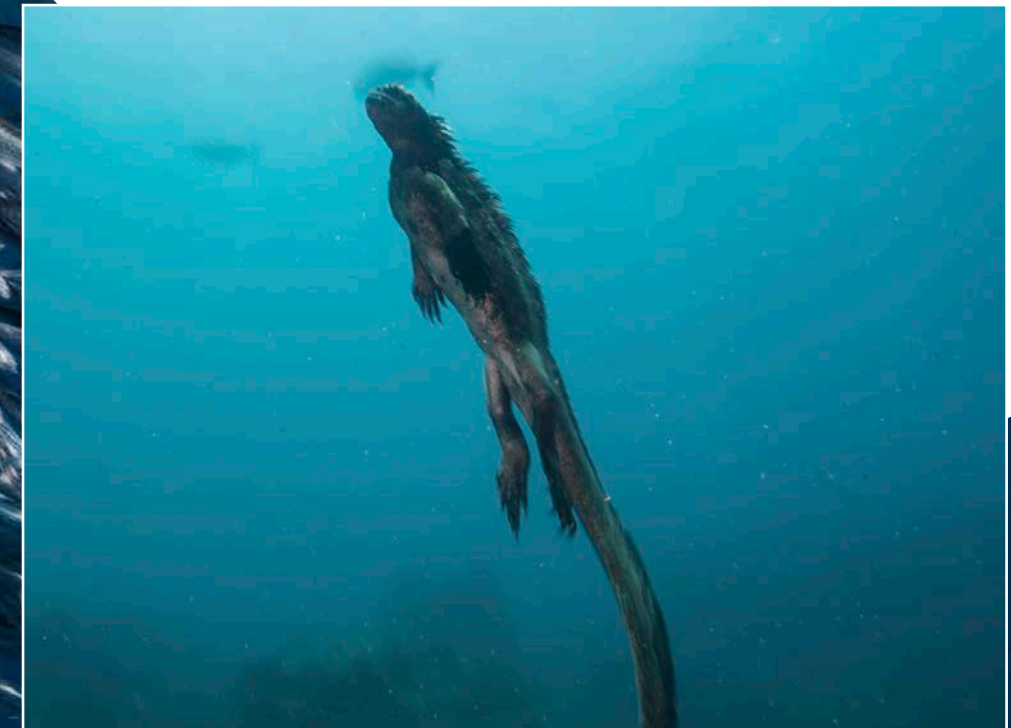
The importance of these efforts has been demonstrated repeatedly following past El Niño events. Over the years, Galápagos Conservancy and its partners have supported research, monitoring, habitat intervention, and species recovery initiatives for many populations impacted by environmental changes.

As scientists continue to monitor conditions in the Pacific, Galápagos Conservancy remains in close

coordination with the Galápagos National Park Directorate and other partners to understand emerging risks and identify opportunities for action. Should significant impacts occur, the scientific knowledge, partnerships, and conservation programs built over decades will provide the foundation for an effective response.

By investing in resilient ecosystems, supporting science-based management, and protecting vulnerable species today, we help ensure that Galápagos wildlife is better equipped to withstand the challenges of a warmer world.

Opposite: Seals swimming in the Galápagos Marine Reserve along a school of fish; Bottom: Marine iguana underwater.



ONCE VISITED, NEVER FORGOTTEN

When Linda Smedberg first flew to the Galápagos Islands in 1999, she had no idea it would inspire a quarter-century of devotion to their conservation. She had just joined a group of passionate birdwatchers from the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and their infectious enthusiasm quickly transformed the way she saw the islands. Fellow travelers patiently guided her eye toward wildlife she might have otherwise missed, like a Flightless Cormorant tucked against a distant rock. Local guides, native to the islands and deeply passionate about their home, led small groups carefully along marked paths, ensuring every visit left as little trace as possible. At the tortoise breeding center, she was struck by the resourcefulness of the conservation teams using hair dryers to keep tortoise eggs warm, and she came face to face with the legendary Lonesome George himself.

It started with a shipboard fundraiser and a simple thought: "Why not?" That small donation was the first of many, and over 25 years, Linda's giving has grown as steadily as her connection to the islands. As she witnessed the power of conservation

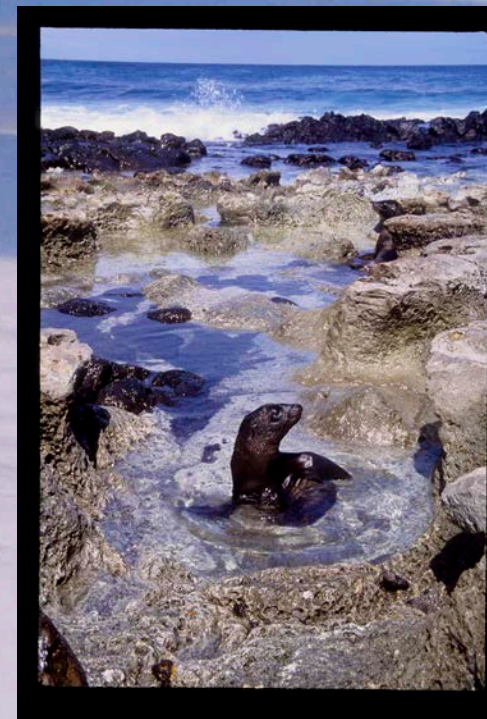
firsthand, including the emotional journey of Lonesome George, the feral goat eradication program, and the triumphant reintroduction of tortoises to Floreana Island after 200 years, she knew she wanted to make a lasting commitment to conserving the archipelago. "I feel I get a bigger bang for the buck," she says. "I can see physical evidence of the good work that is being done."

"The Galápagos is a magical place," she reflected. "The support that I'm able to offer, I hope, helps to keep the magic in place."

Linda's vision for future generations is simple but profound: to swim with sea lions, watch blue-footed boobies dance, and find tortoises thriving on every island. She has made certain that her commitment to that vision will endure for generations to come.

"The support that I'm able to offer, I hope, helps to keep the magic in place."

— Linda Smedberg



Background: Archival image of marine iguanas; Top left: Archival image of Blue-footed Boobies; Top right: Archival image of Galápagos sea lion; Bottom: Archival image of Lonesome George at the Santa Cruz Breeding Center. © Daniel Fitter



For 41 years, Galápagos Conservancy has been
the only U.S.-based nonprofit solely dedicated
to safeguarding the Galápagos Islands — and we
can't do it without you.



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