

A black and white portrait of a man, likely a historical figure, wearing a dark jacket, a patterned vest, and a bow tie. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right.

In the history of science, there are few holy places, but there are the archipelago that lies 650 miles off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific. In a dozen or so islands that make up the Galapagos, Charles Darwin observed creatures that helped to inspire *On the Origin of Species*. Today the island of Isabela, the largest in the group, is in flames after a two-month drought turned the semi-arid landscape tinder-dry. Tourism and uncontrolled fishing are also threatening the unspoilt character of the islands, but the fire is the most urgent problem.

Darwin visited the islands as naturalist on *HMS Beagle*.

which set sail in 1831. Of the five-year voyage, only five weeks were spent on the islands, but what Darwin saw there slowly matured in his mind before emerging many years later in his theory of evolution by natural selection. No more important scientific book has ever been published than *On the Origin of Species* — our whole understanding of the natural world is shot through with Darwinian

The young Darwin had no mission, when he set sail on the *Beagle*, to throw the Book of Genesis to the winds. Nor did what he saw of the animals and birds strike him with the force of revelation. Even his observations of the varieties of finches, later so important to his theories, had to wait until after the *Beagle* had returned home and he had had them classified by John Gould.

to have been here created; yet the close affinity of most of these birds to American species is manifest in every character, in their habits, gestures, and tones of voice.

"So it is with the other animals, and with a large proportion of the plants, as shown by Dr Hooker in his admirable *Flora of the archipelago*. The naturalist, looking at the inhabitants of these volcanic islands in the Pacific

several hundred miles from the continent, feels that he is standing on American land. Why should this be so? Why should the species which are supposed to have been created in the Galapagos Archipelago, and nowhere else, bear so plainly the stamp of affinity to those created in America?"

Facts such as these, he went on in a key passage, "admit of no sort of explanation on the

The evidence, stored in Darwin's capacious mind, allowed of only one explanation. The finches must have been blown to the islands from the mainland by a storm. (We now know what Darwin did not, that this was perhaps a million years ago.) Once there, their descendants became adapted to different types of food, natural selection favouring those with the beaks best suited to the food available.

THE PARTY from the *Beagle* collected animals and plants everywhere they went. Among the specimens returned from the Galapagos were 13 species of finches, whose beaks ranged in size from that of a hawk to that of a warbler. The largest, the *torquatus*, had a massive, hooked beak in shape like the smallest, the warbler finch, a tiny pointed beak.

If Darwin had realised these differences at the time, he would have been more careful in the way he collected and labelled the birds. He would have been more aware of the differences between the islands and were clearly distinguished. It was not until the specimens had been returned to England and classified that their importance struck him.

He realised the diversity of structure in one small, intimately related group from birds. Darwin wrote in 1845, one species had really taken that from an original variety of birds, one species had been taken and modified for different ends.

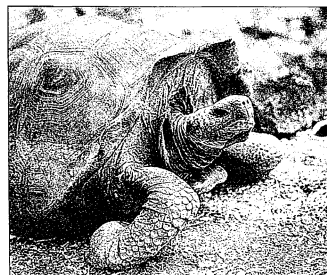
He wrote in *On the Origin of Species*, that is exactly what he did conclude.

The reptiles made more of an impact. Not all of them charmed him: the unique marine iguanas of Galapagos, he said, were the "most disgusting, clumsy lizards . . . imps of darkness".

Like all navigators of the time, the crew of the *Beagle* ate tortoise. "A single Ship's company caught 500-800 in a short time," Darwin wrote approvingly, and his own company netted 15. "The breast-plated roasted with the flesh on it is very good," he reported, "and the young tortoises make excellent soup; but otherwise the meat to my taste is indifferent." Darwin also climbed over the tortoise's backs, and giving a few rapid strokes to the pair of their shells, they would rise up and walk away; but he found it very difficult to keep any balance." This practice is not recommended to today's visitors to the islands.

The animals of the Galapagos were at once strange to Darwin, and familiar. What struck him first was how similar many of them were to those he had seen on the mainland. But later, when he had seen Gould's classification of the finches, he realised how they varied in a subtle way from island to island within the archipelago. Here he said, "both in space and time we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact—that mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth".

The data were summarised in *On the Origin of Species*: "There are 26 land-birds; of these, 21 or perhaps 23 are ranked as distinct species, and would commonly be assumed



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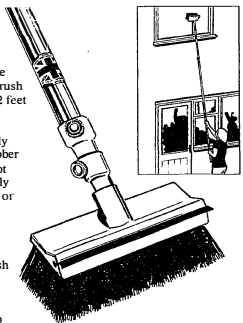
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