



Contact:

Vanesa García, Head of Public Relations, Galápagos National Park, vgarcia@spng.org.ec

Hugo Arnal, South America Regional Director, Island Conservation, hugo.arnal@islandconservation.org

Gabriel Lopez, Executive Director, Charles Darwin Foundation gabriel.lopez@fcdarwin.org.ec

Julia Ponder, Executive Director, The Raptor Center, ponde003@umn.edu

Patricia Parker, Professor and Chair, University of Missouri – St. Louis, pparker@umsl.edu

Glyn Young, Conservation Biologist, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Glyn.Young@durrell.org

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Galapagos Restoration Partners Release Twenty Hawks Back to Islands

The Galapagos National Park, along with partners involved in a recent project to restore several islands, today announced that twenty Galapagos Hawks were released on February 17th and 18th back to the islands where they were captured. The planning process for a recent operation to remove invasive, non-native rodents to protect native species identified that Galapagos Hawks would be at risk during the operation. To mitigate this risk, the restoration project partners captured the hawks from Rábida, Bartolomé and Bainbridge #3 islands prior to the start of the rodent eradication in early January. Hawks were captured without incident and taken to temporary aviaries on a nearby island, where they were maintained in excellent health throughout the six-week holding period, putting on an average of 100 grams each by the release date. Prior to release, each hawk was fitted with a back-pack style telemetry transmitter that will allow it to be tracked and monitored for over a year. No hawk mortalities occurred during the entire operation.

According to Julia Ponder, Executive Director of The Raptor Center, “Galapagos Hawks are polyandrous, meaning that they have a unique social structure amongst raptors where females maintain harems of males. This unique characteristic allowed us to house a territory group per aviary. Our experience with raptors in captivity elsewhere allowed us to take a preventative health, rather than reactive approach, to issues related to keeping hawks in captivity. This approach allowed us to maintain the hawks in excellent condition throughout the holding period.”

“We expect that now, in the absence of rodents, there will be an increase in native prey, such as centipedes, grasshoppers and lava lizards, which will sustain the population of hawks now that they won’t be feeding on rodents.” said Victor Carrion, who is the Technical Coordinator for the Park.

To protect the hawks, the Galapagos National Park was assisted by Island Conservation, the Charles Darwin Foundation, The Raptor Center at University of Minnesota, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and University of Missouri at St. Louis. The partners were supported by contributions from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Bell Laboratories, Landcare Research, Boston Environmental, Lindblad

Expeditions, The Peregrine Fund and the 3M Foundation. This partnership is working to prevent extinctions and restore altered ecosystems on the Galapagos by permanently removing damaging introduced rodents from key islands. On the 7-8th and 14-15th of January 2011, two treatments of rodent bait donated by Bell Laboratories were applied by helicopter to the islands of Rábida, Bartolomé, Sombrero Chino, North Plaza, the two Beagle islets, and three of the Bainbridge Rocks in the first phase of this project.

According to Hugo Arnal, South America Regional Director for Island Conservation, “this is the first time Galapagos Hawks have been maintained in captivity and successfully released. With the knowledge and experience gained future projects will be able to adapt this model to other raptor species and replicate this successful operation.”

“Invasive species pose the greatest threat to nature in the Galapagos,” said Gabriel Lopez, Executive Director of the Charles Darwin Foundation. “The islands targeted for rodent eradication cover 704 hectares or 1740 acres and are home to 12 unique Galapagos species considered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature to be threatened with extinction. Eradicating invasive rodents from these islands will benefit many species unique to the Galapagos.”

The partners expect to adapt the techniques used in this first phase to remove rodents from larger islands in the future. Preparations are underway for removing black rats from Pinzón Island where they have prevented the Galapagos Giant Tortoise from successfully breeding in the wild for over 100 years by consuming eggs and hatchlings. The tortoise population is sustained only by hatching eggs and rearing tortoises to a size where they are ‘rat-proof’ and then releasing them.

Funds are urgently required to allow the Pinzón project to stay on-track.

For more information about the project and island restoration, please visit these partner websites:

Galápagos National Park <http://galapagospark.org/>

Island Conservation <http://www.islandconservation.org/>

Charles Darwin Foundation <http://www.darwinfoundation.org/>

Bell Laboratories <http://www.belllabs.com/>

The Raptor Center <http://www.theraptorcenter.org>

University of Missouri – St. Louis <http://www.umsl.edu/>

Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust <http://www.durrell.org/>

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For high-resolution photographs, please visit www.islandconservation.org.