



The Galapagos

A look at the finches of the Galapagos islands

David Robinson

Although he didn't realise it at the time, the most important specimens that Charles Darwin brought back from the Galapagos were finches. Initially we wasn't sure how they were related but when back in England, they were examined by the Ornithologist John Gould, he reported that in fact Darwin had brought back 13 different species of finch, all of which were unique to the Galapagos.

This realisation played a significant role in Darwin's formulation of his theory of evolution.

The most important differences between the finches came in their beaks. Some were large. Some were small. Each one was suited to the availability of particular foodstuffs.

Eventually Darwin theorised that different species of finch had evolved on different islands. Their distinctive beaks being an adaptation to distinct natural habitats or environmental niches.

In the years since Darwin's visit, many other scientists and ornithologists have come to the Galapagos to study its finches. In this experiment researches are observing the Woodpecker Finch, using this wooden box to stand in for a tree. The Woodpecker Finch is one of the only birds to use tools to help it find food. A stick or small twig enables is to dig deeper into tree bark, for insect lave. This skill enables is to survive in conditions which other birds would find difficult.

In the dry season, it can gather up to 50% of its food in this way. Woodpecker Finches are hungry birds, which in the wild need to eat every three hours so they never turn down the chance of a free meal.