

# THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARING OPUNTIA

by Frank J. Sulloway

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I have spent an inordinate amount of time poring over thousands of old photographs from Galapagos. In some of them there are giant tortoises, others show Darwin's famous finches, and land iguanas also make the occasional appearance. But it's not the animal life I am principally examining. It's the giant tree *Opuntia* or prickly pear cacti, whose life histories have drawn me into a considerable mystery.



I made my first visit to Galapagos in 1968 as part of an expedition to film the sites visited by Charles Darwin during the *Beagle* voyage. I returned in 1970 with three fellow students to explore unresolved questions about Darwin's conversion to the theory of evolution. In the process, I and my fellow expedition members accumulated more than 5,000 photographs documenting our work on 11 different islands.

Over the next 30 years, I looked at these images only occasionally. But around ten years ago it occurred to me that this collection of photos, along with others taken in 1982, could form the basis of a "repeat photography" project. With enough images, perhaps they could act like a visual "time machine", providing a powerful way to

