

Orcas at Punta Norte
Peninsula Valdez, Argentina
1st - 23rd March 2007
Blubber in a beach



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As part of a three month backpacking trip through southern South America, I visited Peninsula Valdez, Argentina in March 2007 in the hope of experiencing what must be one of the best wildlife encounters in the world, Orcas plucking sea-lions pups 'furry peanuts' off the beach at Punta Norte.

The original plan was to only spend one week there; however this turned into three. I was on a rather tight budget so hired a car in Puerto Madryn and stayed in Puerto Piramides, where there are a few accommodation options. Puerto Piramides is around 70kms (1 ½ hour drive each way) from Punta Norte on dirt tracks. This was done every day except one.

You can stay at La Ernestina <http://www.laernestina.com/> who own the area around Punta Norte and have half of the Orca attack beaches reserved for private viewing, but the costs were way out of my league.

1st March. Drove out to Punta Norte, and stayed at the public viewing area all day. This overlooks one of the main beaches and there is no public access to the beaches itself. Photographers can access certain location with one of the wardens by purchasing a permit for several hundreds of dollars a day, but nothing is guaranteed. No Orcas were seen that day, but I did meet several people working on the Orcas and other travellers keen to see the attacks. After this day, a few fellow travellers shared vehicle costs.



2nd March. Arrived at Punta Norte to see 'Mel' the male (most of the footage you see is of him) and a female offshore. That day four attacks were witnessed (at least one was successful), but



they were all at a range of over 600 metres. Mel apparently only generally attacks in a deep water channel and there is no public access closer to this location. This was fantastic to see, but it did leave me wanting more and talking to those who work on the group (<http://www.pnor.org/en/>) they suggested that I should stay around until the group of females turn up, as they are the

ones that attack in front of the public viewing area, so I did.

3rd-17th March. The daily routine was to arrive at Punta Norte two hours before high tide and then hang around until two hours after (luckily there is a small café present). Northerlies winds were bad news as the surf was too big and the animals just don't turn up. The next Orcas were seen on the 12th and again on the 15th March when Mel and his female returned. He swam close into shore but always attacked at range.

18th March. Strong northerlies were forecast and a gale force wind was howling at Puerto Piramides, so a few of us decided to visit a Magellanic penguin colony (Punta Tombo) and take a boat trip to see Commerson's Dolphins (Puerto Rawson). The later wasn't great as they seemed to be harassing the dolphins a lot. Anyway leaving Valdez was a big mistake. We returned that evening to hear the news that the females were back and there had been 17 attacks that day, many in front of the public viewing area. Apparently, there had been no wind at Punta Norte. Bugger, to say the least, and I should have known better.

19th March. We arrived at Punta Norte the next day to see the females were still around, circling offshore. What a relief. As the tide came in the attacks started again. That day we witnessed around dozen attacks, some at a range of 50 metres right in front of us. Apparently it wasn't quite as full on as the previous day as the pups had learnt that fins were bad news and were unsurprisingly wary. One of the main females (only seven animals actually beach themselves) also seemed to be spending quite a lot of time training her young. Many of the pups caught would be dragged out to sea alive and then battered around for a while before being consumed. Very exhilarating to watch but was very gruesome.





20th March. Arrived to see the group were still around. Great! The females started to patrol close into shore; however, after a short while they disappeared around the corner to La Ernestina's private viewing area and no further attacks were witnessed. The following day the animals had left the area and had been recorded elsewhere on the Peninsula.

The best time to see the attacks seems to be around mid-March but you have to be lucky as it depends on when the females return. Having a few weeks spare certainly helped me and it would have to go down as my top wildlife encounter. It certainly had its highs and lows. I visited the site again in 2009 for 9 days (1st – 9th March), but only saw Mel attack 500 metres away. The females weren't in town.

Other mammals seen included: Grey Fox, Hairy Armadillo (both in Punta Norte car park), South American Sea-lion, Southern Elephant Seal and Mara. No Southern Right Whales were seen at this time of year.



23rd March Punta Ninfas on the southern edge of the Gulf of Nuevo is also worth a visit as the public can access the beach below the car-park. This area is a regular site for Southern Elephant Seal to haul out and can be approached with care.