

Chile Dec/January 2014

In late December 2014 my family and I went on a trip to Torres del Paine in Chile, parts of southern Argentina, and Chepu Island. Several trip reports have already been written about these areas, so I will only provide a short summary of highlights and things to be aware of, which might be of assistance to future travellers to the area.

We flew in to Punta Arenas and spent two nights at a small lodge call Casa Escondida. The owners were very friendly people and the place was great value. European rabbits and hares were common on the lodge grounds. The next day we took a boat trip to the penguin colony at Magdalena island. We saw two pods of Peale's dolphin and a large colony of South American Sealions.

Torres del Paine. We stayed at a place called Eco-lodge, which I would not recommend for mammal watchers. When you arrive you get assigned a (very young) guide who stays with you for the duration of your stay, and they rotate you through a variety of activities - walks, boat trips etc. The activities come as a package, so you pay for them regardless of whether you participate or not, which makes it expensive if you plan to go off on your own. Mind you, none of the places we checked were particularly cheap so I'm not sure where to suggest that people stay.

For my visit I hired a vehicle with driver from Francisco Vargas, who is based in Puerto Natales. I found the roads in Chile to be excellent, and self-driving would be an easy option. However if you take this route, remember that there is no-where to buy fuel in or around the Park, so make sure you buy a couple of fuel containers when you arrive and fill them up in Puerto Natales.

A key goal of my trip was to see puma. Torres del Paine is well known as one of the best places in the world to see this species, but of course, you need to know how and where to look for them. Most of the staff/guides I met at the lodges, some of who had worked there for many years, had never seen one, so you're unlikely to come across one by chance. Spotlighting is now apparently not allowed in the park, so the best way to find them is to use one of the four or five licenced puma guides. Regardless of whether you want to see puma or not, these are the people to go with, as they are allowed to walk wherever they want in the Park and are not restricted to the trails, unlike everyone else. The best known and longest operating puma guide is Jose Vargas, who's services I hired for two days. Or at least I thought I had; he's not the world's best communicator and had seemingly forgotten that I was coming, so sent his son (also Jose) to guide me instead. Jose Jr. and I set out at 6 am on my first full day in the Park, and any concerns about his abilities as a puma spotter were quickly allayed when 20 minutes later he found a puma walking along a hillside. The guanaco alarm calls (which sound remarkably like zebras braying) are the give-away, and it's a case of triangulating from the calls until you find the predator. On this occasion it was a young female with no tail that Jose and his father had known since she was a cub. She clearly was accustomed to his presence as she proceeded to trot towards us and passed within 5 meters of us on her way down the hill. We then followed her for the next two hours, and watched her kill and eat a Grey fox before she

disappeared into a swamp. I wish all my mammal watching attempts were that successful!

The following day we found another puma - the sister of the one we'd seen the day before - although she was resting in a cave and we only got views of her head when she would occasionally raise it.



Puma at 5 meters.

Other species:

Guanaco - everywhere in the Park

Grey fox - common throughout the Park; I saw several pairs each day.

Culpeo fox - this species is less common than the Grey fox and I only saw one individual. There was a den on the lodge grounds and I got a short view of one of the pups.

Humboldt's hog-nosed skunk - another species that was apparently denning at the lodge.

I saw one very bedraggled individual while out looking for puma.

Big Hairy armadillo - the best place to see this species is at the camp of the road crew, which is just outside the Park. Apparently they feed them there and they come trotting up after meal times. We went to the camp in the morning (the staff didn't have a problem with us being there, but beware of the dog that tries to hump your leg every-time you step out of the vehicle), and stayed for about 30 minutes without seeing one, and decided to come back in the afternoon. We returned at about 6pm and within 20 minutes had found a (very fat) armadillo wandering about under the cabins.

Huemul - I drove to Lago Grey to look for this species, but apparently they are now very difficult to see in this part of the Park ever since a tourist (who's nationality will remain

unmentioned - won't it Tomer...) burned down a large portion of the park a few years ago, badly damaging the vegetation. We climbed a trail at the end of the road at Lago Grey, and one of the guides said he'd seen a Huemul that day near the top, so I suspect that if one stayed at the nearby lodge and climbed this trail early in the morning it might be possible to see one. The park staff told me that there was another trail where the chances of seeing one were a bit better, but that you had to go there with an official guide.

## Chiloe

My target species here were Marine otter, Southern River otter, Darwin Island Fox and Pudu, and I was hoping that I might also see some Chilean dolphins if I was lucky. At Puerto Montt airport I hired a small vehicle using Econorent rental car. The people at the desk didn't speak a word of English and when I returned the car (in a hurry because I was late for my flight), they charged me almost as much to fill up a ¼ tank of gas than for 5 days rental. Probably best to stick to international car rental agencies if possible to avoid these sorts of problems, although they are sometimes no better. A small car is all you need, as again, the roads in Chile are mostly excellent.

I stayed 3 nights at Chepu Adventure lodge as my base to look for both species of otter. Unfortunately I picked up the flu with an accompanying high fever, which severely curtailed my activities on the island. I managed to get out on the river for a few boat trips with Javier (who's contact details are mentioned in Jon's Chile report), to look for the Southern river otter, but only saw Coypu. Irritatingly some other tourists who did the early morning kayak trip got good views of the Otter, so they're definitely still around. There are a few Southern Pudu roaming around the grounds of the lodge and I saw them several times at dusk.

I also dragged myself to Puniuil to look for the Marine otter. As you drive up the people on the beach guide you to the nearest boat that is ready to leave, and you jump on for a 20-30 minute tour around the nearby islands. I saw 4-5 Marine otters, mostly at close range, and I suspect you could probably see them from the shore if you walk to the very end of the beach.

After Chepu I drove down to Yaldad on the southern end of the island to look for Chilean dolphins, but the bay where Jon saw them was now full of fishing nets, and the local people I spoke to said they now only see them out to sea. I did however see several pods of Peale's dolphin as I drove along the coast.

My final night was spent at Parque Tepuhuieco, in an attempt to find a Darwin's fox. The (very pricey) hotel had been closed for a while and clearly they had stopped feeding the foxes during that period, as they no longer hang around the lodge at night. I drove around until about 3 am, and saw lots of Pudu, and one juvenile mouse of unknown origin, but unfortunately no foxes.

I miscalculated the time it would take me to get to the airport the next day and managed to miss my flight, but fortunately there are many flights between Puerto Montt and

Santiago, so I was able to hop onto the next one. My Chiloe adventure had not gone very well, what with getting the flu and missing many of my target species, but it was nevertheless an interesting trip. I told the lodge manager at Parque Tepuhuieco that they should note down when they see Darwin's foxes, and if you intend to visit I would contact them first to ask if there have been any recent sightings. If anyone else knows of a good site for this species please let me know.