

## **Trip report Argentina, Bolivia & Chile: 8.11.11 – 21.12.11.**

I had never been to South America, but as a fan of *big cats* I wanted to try my luck to see and photograph the big cats of the new World: *Jaguar* and *Puma* in the wild.

That's why I planned a trip to the Pantanal, Brazil (this part is reported in a separate report) and Torres del Paine, Chile for best chances for both big cats. Since I am a hobby photographer in general as well, I planned a big three months trip to South America with my backpack just to enjoy traveling. In total I traveled over more than 20.000 km by local public bus through Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. Main goal was to see as much wildlife (mammals, birds and other stuff) as possible, but also enjoy the great landscapes and cultural highlights of this indeed beautiful part of the world.

During this trip I rented (with others) three times for a short period a rental car of which two times specifically for watching wildlife. The following report writes down the sightings of all mammals, most interesting birds and other specialties to mention. I will report it in following of the beneath mentioned places, since these are more or less separate to visit and in following of my trip

Since this was my first time to South America, I was a bit worried about some stories of risks of robberies. So I thought I will start with a guided jaguar tour. If this would be a success, I would send my photo's direct home as soon as possible, 'as an insurance'. But in the end during my three months trip I luckily had no bad moments at all. So it is possible to travel by yourself and visit South America without any problems. Obviously, as everybody says, I still would recommend to always mind your belongings, since I did hear some stories of people who lost their stuff. (at bus station swap of luggage and a brake-in a rental car (just don't leave stuff inside in vision...)).

I hope you will enjoy this report and feel free to commend or ask questions!

I specially want to thank [www.mammalwatching.com](http://www.mammalwatching.com) for presenting such worth full trip reports. For me it was of great use and guidance and more or less I picked the right info from several writers.

Best regards,

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The different places I visited for wildlife were:

#### **Argentina**

- Salta region (los Cordones NP, Quebrada Cafayate, Humahuaca, Ruta de los Andes) (4 days)
- Peninsula Valdes (including punto Tombo) (3 days)
- El Calafate (perito Moreno glacier, NP Los Glaciers, Fitz Roy, Cerro Torre (5 days)
- Buenos Aires (1 week, mainly relaxing)

#### **Chile**

- Atacama desert (2 days)
- Torres del Paine (9 days) (incl Penguin point, harbor of Puerto Natales and Punta Arenas)

#### **Bolivia**

- Salar de Uyuni (4 days)



***Salta and around (north west Argentina) (4-11 t/m 9-11)***

Although this city has a nice tower/church it isn't for Europeans a real highlight, the surrounding landscapes in opposite are! Great drives and beautiful views. I rented a car for four days with a French Couple and an Argentinian to make a tourist trip we visited:

La Humahuaca great colored rock formations

Quebrada de Cafayate very nice shaped (reddish) rock formations just great views

Paso de los Andes (road to Chile) going up the mountains you can see beside wide views the first **guanaco's**, and on the plateau at highest parts we saw the first group of **Vicuna's**.

Los Cordones NP gives great views and the amazing 'cactus forest'. We saw a **patagonian/grey fox** and a **hare** in the West side of the park. Also worth to mention were the blooming cactus this time of year, with white flowers.

***San Pedro de Atacama (northern Chile) (10-11 t/m 12-11)***

A small place with a lot of opportunities for excursions. The excursion to Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia is the most popular one and definitely not to be missed.

I rented a bicycle and went to a small area just north of the town to look for Andean fox but didn't see it. But I saw some desert bird species here. The landscape is bizarre and extremely dry, just barren land. In the evening I cycled to the 'valley of the moon' (la luna), a national park which has very nice rock formations and the sunset here is a beautiful experience with looks all over the Andes, recommendable if time!

***Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia (13-11 t/m 16-11)***

I booked a tour to Salar de Uyuni in which you drive in three days to the Town Uyuni in Bolivia. You drive through a national park high in the Andes.

This is a really awesome excursion with fantastic views of different great landscapes/volcanos and lakes. In the lakes are *flamingo* colonies and some *Andean birds like Andean goose, giant Andean coot, Andean gull and Andean lapwing* you can see here. Also we saw some herds of **vicuna**. One place near a pond on the rocks a **mountain Vizcacha** was sleeping, a weird but cute animal.

The salt flats of Uyuni are an otherworldly experience, not to be missed. Just enjoy the white view. I decided to take a return transfer to San Pedro de Atacama to go down to Patagonia. This was possible and so I had two drives through the high Andes.



**Vicuna**







**mountain Vizcacha**







**Flamengo**



***Drive San Pedro Atacama – Santiago - Mendoza (Argentina) (18-11)***

I took a long transfer to go to Mendoza to go from here further to Peninsula Valdes. The pass over the Andes to Mendoza from Santiago is also a great ride where you see the real rocky big mountains and you pass Aconcagua. No mammals seen.

***Peninsula Valdes, northern Patagonia Argentina (20-11 - 23-11)***

Here I rented a car with a friend and we drove to the Island'. It turned out to be a good choice a driving by yourself gives freedom. We saw on the coast viewpoints **sea lions**, **sea elephants** and a **grey whale** also *penguins* and *giant petrels*. Inland we got **Guanaco's**, two **patagonian fox**, a few **mara**, a **hairy armadillo** (at visitor point north) and two **hog nosed skunk** (around sunset animals appear). On the second day at the eastern viewpoint we saw 3 hunting **Orcas**! Not normal for that time of year. They tried to get a young sea elephant for 20 minutes, but it finally escaped to the beach. We also made a boat excursion to the **grey whales** which is also nice and gives good sightings from close distance.

After this we decided to go to Punto Tombo for the huge penguin colony which also had **rock cavy** around. We also made a boat trip to the **commerson's dolphins**, who were nice and easily found. On our way back from Punta Tombo driving to the main road, it was around sunset, we saw a small mammal crossing the tart road and as we came closer it looked like a fox, but a better look said **geoffreys cat**! It sat for just a few seconds in the roadside but my camera was already packed (unlucky...), finally I got it and only got a proof shot. But this was an unexpected bonus! All together this area is a good place to see some nice species.





**Patagonian fox**







**mara**



**hairy armadillo**





**geoffrey's cat**



**guanaco**





sea lion



sea elephant





rock cavy



hog nosed skunk









***orca attack!***







**grey whale**





**commerson's dolphin**

***El Calafate and El Chalten, southern Patagonia Argentina (24-11 – 29-11)***

these places are nice to visit and have some highlights as Perito Moreno glacier is very nice. Fitz roy mountain range and cerro torre are both very nice for walks with good possibilities to see condor but no mammals. (I saw **patagonian fox** and **guanaco** from the bus)  
Just outside El Calafate is a small lake/wetland next to the big lake. This is a special birding spot where you can see some nice new species, it has a visitor house and is good for a afternoon, or morning.

***Punta Arenas, Chile (30-11 - 2-12)***

In Punta Arenas you can see nice cormorants colonies along the coast on the wooden piers, also saw flightless duck here.

***Torres del Paine (TDP), Chile (3-12 - 11-12)***

I had an appointment in Punta Arenas with a friend who I met in Spain looking for *Iberian Lynx* during spring 2011. We than decided to try our luck in search of puma in TDP for 9 days in December. It turned out to a **success!**

The drive to TDP is nice with great views of mystic woods halfway, this gives a bit strange look, but nice. We saw some birds like Nandu, a few ducks and two condor. Near the park you start to see the **guanaco** herds which are seen here all the time in the park. Also we saw a **patagonian fox** of which in later days only a few showed up. Before we went to TDP I watched a dvd of 'Puma, Lion of the Andes' (filmed by Hugh Miles). This was the trigger to get more into it as we were already.

So we went to the park. From a distant it looks great and wide and the torres mountains form the compact center. Around the torres is a big area of low hill shaped land, this is where the Pumas roam. It is bordered by a huge blue lake, lago Sarmiento, with white rocky cliffs on the sides. In the Dvd Hugh Miles filmed his first puma here.



We read from earlier trip reports that the lowland area is the place where to look. So we camped at a lodge/farm just outside the park on the east side. We were on budget so we camped. The weather was ok, as we heard it could be pretty bad quit often... The wind is always around here.

So we planned to walk to an area where we thought it would be good terrain. We wanted to do a stakeout on a higher place with a wide view. Well, as you are there, you find it is a great area and where to look...!? I was worried this would become a needle in a haystack. At the end of the first day it was near darkness and we didn't see a puma. Loads of Guanaco though and a lot of newborn ones since it was end of spring. But we red before that you have to look where the Guanaco are, so we knew we were in the right area. I thought myself driving around over the gravel roads would give more space to look and more different things to see, so we tried that as well. Luckily the second day we met a group of people near the park entrance on a parking lot. They seemed to be interested in Puma as well. It appeared to be a German film crew who were filming puma for last 2 years in the park. This gave us spirit! We asked what was best to do if looking for puma. They told to slowly drive around at dusk and dawn would give best chances. This was actually their tactic! So I was a bit pleased not do stakeouts again. But as we wanted to drive away, the German knocked on the car window. He told us that a guanaco was making an alarm call and we heard this sound clearly. (a sort of quick barking ie!, ie!, ie!, ie!, only watching in one direction). This is the main key to find Puma. Guanaco have great eyesight and they will not mistake. So we looked into its focus direction. And walked up a little hill to see what was behind, and there it walked... a **puma**! We had great views of it. The puma kept a distance but didn't fled off. We watched it for a while. So we were very happy that we had reached our goal to see and photograph a wild puma. The following days we filled in with driving around mornings and evenings.

Although we had our sighting of Puma already I wanted to try to get a guided excursion of famous local puma tracker Eduardo Loyal. At the visitor info of the eastern park entrance we asked for him. He is a local famous park ranger who nowadays also does guiding puma tours. We drove to his house which was just close to the route to lago grey (more in the west of the park). We met him and told that we wanted a guide. He was having time and we arranged a fair price and made an appointment for next early morning at a crossing of some roads. Next morning he wasn't there at the time of 5.00... so we were worried. But after 20 minutes waiting we saw a car spotlighting the sides and it was him. From then we followed his car (a bit strange since we thought he would come with us in our car) but ok. We drove around for a while and looked at certain points, but nothing. After that we started a little walk somewhere near the lake and after a while we heard the same guanaco alarm call! We found the puma again! We had good views of it, as it walked away from us. In the afternoon we went to the same place and found it again, probably it was a territory, the puma seemed to be not too shy for humans, but definitely wasn't tame. We were lucky to see it hunting from a distance on a hare! A very special moment. The Germans actually were trying to get just that on film, but it seemed very hard to get! The next days we couldn't find it again. Crazy idea is that you get the feeling again of having no chance of seeing it at all in this big wide area...

On the sixth day during a drive I found a head just pointing of a ridge against the sky. I directly saw it was a **Puma**! It was laying relaxed, we watched it from a distance, but it started to rain and it took off in some little forest/bush and not to be seen anymore as it started to rain harder and longer.

Next day no pumas so on our one last day we spoke with the German as they drove around as well and we asked if we could join them in the search, but since they were behind schedule (one group worked at night and one in dusk/morning). This was not possible but they told us a place where they had seen a puma that night. We drove there, but nothing. We decided to wait a bit and search around driving a bit further. Luckily we then saw a head in the low shrub a **Puma**! We walked up a hill to get better views and found it had a kill there. We decided to come back in the evening. As we came there in the evening we found two grown-up young pumas watching us from the bush. A great moment we could see two pumas for a while. They walked away and we had to get back since it was getting dark.

Our last day didn't bring any sightings. Finally we had *seen 4 different puma's* in our nine days. We had good weather which helped probably a lot. But obviously the help of the filmcrew and Eduardo was excellent! But in the end we also managed to get at least one sighting pure by ourselves as well. The pictures we got are very satisfying making this trip a big success.

Other animals seen here: twice an **Andean fox** (one near hotel/lodge torres del paine over the small iron bridge), a **hog nosed skunk** family and a solo one. **Hare** are common once in a while. A few times **patagonian fox** and obvious lots of **Guanaco** and finally an unidentified **mouse**. We didn't got to see the *huemul* (deer). We did one attempt to see as they seem to be more in the forested parts in the west of the park on the road to Grey Glacier, but this isn't the place for puma. So we put mainly our effort on puma.

#### Birds to mention

Another thing to recommend is the **Condor** that fly around. We managed to see them twice on the ground near puma kills of guanaco. We got good pictures of them in flight. Also some *Nandu* with chicks and in the little lakes we saw some *grebes and ducks*.



**Torres del paine**



guanaco







**guanaco**







**hare**



**hog nosed skunk**





andean fox







puma



puma 'on the rocks'





**two young puma**



**puma hunting hare!**





condor





**busard eagle**



**nandu**





**penguin** (Punta Tombo, also seen at Peninsula Valdes and near Punta Arenas (a state park))

**Buenos Aires (14-12 – 22-12)**

I ended my trip with a long bus ride back up to Buenos Aires from where I would fly home.  
Buenos Aires is a big pleasant City.

I walked in the wetland area just east of the Centre. It is a nice city park where all people go out for walking or running. It was at that time rather dry and the reeds were high so water birds were hard to find. What was nice were the **cavies** that walked around. So if you miss this mammal you can easily find it here. I saw them most in the eastern part eating grass on little open dead end tracks.

I also made a visit to the city Zoo where funny enough was an empty jaguar cage and no puma are kept. They do have a snow leopard > so that's my next plan.... ☺.

Zoos are for me good places to watch animals and planning new trips for!

Utrecht, 14 november 2012

Janco van Gelderen

**TRIPLIST of Mammals**

- 1 hairy armadillo (peninsula valdes)**
- 2 hare (Torres del Paine, Salta)**
- 3 vicuna (Bolivia)**
- 4 mountain vizcacha (Bolivia)**
- 5 guanaco (Bolivia, Patagonia)**
- 6 cavy (Buenos Aires)**
- 7 rock cavy (peninsula valdes)**
- 8 mara (peninsula valdes)**
- 9 Patagonian fox (Patagonia)**
- 10 Andean fox (Torres del Paine)**
- 11 Hognosed skunk (Patagonia)**
- 12 puma (Torres del Paine)**
- 13 Geoffroy's cat (peninsula valdes)**
- 14 grey humpback whale (peninsula valdes)**
- 15 orca (peninsula valdes)**
- 16 sea lion (peninsula valdes)**
- 17 sea elephant (peninsula valdes)**
- 18 Commerson's dolphin (peninsula valdes)**
- 19 mouse (unidentified, Torres del Paine)**