



## Chiloe, April 2016 – 5 days

### Day 1

#### The crossing:

To get from Puerto Montt (Mainland Chile, where one of the main airports serving Chiloe is), to the main island, you need to drive for an hour and then take a 30 minute ferry. Unfortunately no dolphins visible at all, but plenty of **South American sealions**, a rainbow over Chiloe, and a black-browed albatross. That must be an omen!

#### Puñihuil:

It was raining so heavily that I couldn't go otter-watching as planned, and so was advised to visit the La Cuy peninsula by a guide who once saw a guiña there, and has since seen many dolphins from the shore. Before heading to the peninsula, the sun was out and so I decided to pass by Puñihuil to check whether I could see any otters. No otters, but flightless steamer ducks made me happy.



South American Sealion

#### La Cuy peninsula:

No sign of any dolphins, nothing in the forest, and my car got stuck in the sand dunes behind the beach at Guabun. Pedro, who kindly towed me out after a couple of hours, spoke of a lake behind the dunes with plenty of bird life and 'nutrias' (otters). There must have been some confusion but the names given to animals here can be a little confusing. For reference, a quick summary of what people call some animals in Chiloe:

Marine otter: *Nutria (del mar)* = (sea) otter; *gato del mar* = 'sea cat'; and there's another local name I can't remember.

Southern river otter: *Nutria (del rio)* = (river) otter; *huillin* [which can sound a lot like 'huiña' depending on who's speaking].

Kodkod/Guiña: *Huiña*; *gato del monte* = mountain cat – similar to the name Geoffroy's cat is often given on the continental mainland

Coypu: *Coypo*. Some call it *nutria* out of confusion.

The 'nutrias' on the lake in Guabun are **coypu**, but there were plenty of them, along with some interesting waterfowl. (Seen at 6pm)

On the drive out of La Cuy, I had my headlights on full and picked up eyeshine from a small wild cat quickly crossing the road. Not melanistic and not domestic. It was a **guiña**! Albeit a poor and brief sighting. Sadly no photos, but I was incredibly lucky. Of course I spent another 2 hours in this area with no further luck. (Seen at 8pm)

## Day 2

Rio Coluco (Chepu): 4.5 hours spent looking for river otters at dawn with no luck. Apparently the river was too high after recent rains and the current too strong. A **brown rat** was seen on the river's edge when we set off from Chepu (07.40am).

Alihuen: 4 hours spent at this impressive project outside Chepu looking for pudu, again with no luck. I'm told they were spotted by the next day, of course.

Puñihuil: Another attempt for marine otters, again with nobody to take me around the islands. I was told that there are no tours this time of year as there are no penguins, and there were no fishermen to pay for a private trip. I was told they only fish when the sea is calmer (despite it seeming great at the time of my visit), but was later informed that they now make so much money from the penguin tours in summer that they don't really need to fish the rest of the year.

La Cuy peninsula: Another attempt to find guiñas. I went with some camera traps in the hope I could set them down deep in remote forest. Unfortunately all the potential sites I identified on the map are actually now close to logging roads and the forest is very thick, with bamboo and bushes impeding passage. No clearings found either. Again, no dolphins visible.

## Day 3

The morning was spent driving along the coast and looking for dolphins between Ancud and Guabun with no luck, and after arranging the next day I went beyond Ancud to look for flamingos, but nothing there.

## Day 4

With no response from anyone at all in Parque Tepuhueico, I found the most economical thing to do was a day tour to Parque Tantauco at the south of the island. My guide didn't want to stay late to spotlight so as a compromise he eventually agreed to a 10-minute coastal stop to check for dolphins. I'd been missing the dolphins but thought it would be better than nothing.

Compu: We stopped just outside Compu and amazingly after a few minutes spotted a pod of at least 5 **Chilean dolphins** about 80 metres from the shore (10am). My guide said he'd never found dolphins here before.



Chilean dolphin

Parque Tantauco: A very nice park. It's actually enormous, with only around 25km of roads. I'm told the lake here is good for otters. There are also two habituated foxes which are more easily visible in the summer. There's an area

where guinea sightings are said to be frequent, but when trying to find more information we discovered the most recent sightings were one year ago, and a ranger saw one the previous year. Lots of fresh fox droppings at the lower end of the Sempreverde route, as well as some fresh pudu droppings higher up the Lake route. Next to 'mirador huillines' is an area with lots of berry bushes. The myrtle are mostly eaten, with small bite marks out of some of the other berries. Of course it could be any rodent (or marsupial), but I'd be keen to look for monito del monte here. The lakeside path down here was covered in fresh pudu tracks.

We saw a female **pudu** at the roadside on the way out of the park (6.30pm). Much more slender than I had expected (having seen many captive animals).

## Day 5

Chepu: A final attempt for river otters. We spent 3.5 hours on Rio Puntra and a further 3 hours exploring other avenues. A **coypu** was seen under a bush at 10am - apparently that's unusual here. We briefly saw a **river otter** at 10.45. After investigating some ripples and stopping at a tree where Fernando, the guide, had seen them before, an otter came out within a couple of metres of the boat, got scared when we turned around and disappeared. It didn't show up again in the 1.5h we spent drifting around the area.

Puñihuil: A final attempt to see marine otters. It being a Sunday, the beach was busy with visitors but no boat activity. Nothing seen from the shore.

Caulin: Lots of interesting birds but no mammals

Ferry crossing: Some **sealions** visible, not as many or as clearly as the initial crossing. Albatross, shearwaters and penguins also seen.



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**South American sealions:** Brief views of many animals on both ferry crossings to the island.

**Coypu:** Several sightings at the lake behind Playa Guabun in the evenings, and a morning sighting of a single animal on Rio Puntra.

**Guña:** A poor sighting of a single animal crossing the road shortly after dark.

**Brown rat:** Across from the pier at Chepu before sunrise

**Bat sp.:** Unidentified; seen over the road near Castro

**Chilean dolphin:** A pod of at least 5 seen from the shore outside Coimbu

**Southern pudu:** Single female seen in Parque Tantauco by the road.

**Southern river otter:** Single skittish animal seen very briefly on Rio Puntra

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As this was such a limited trip, I tried to work out the best places (anecdotally) to see some of these creatures.

It seems that early-mid summer (i.e. November) is by far the best time of year to see most wild animals, according to the locals.

**Southern river otter:** Although successful, I'm not convinced that motorboats from Chepu are the best way to find them anymore - my guide said in the past couple of years the otters have generally become less easily visible, with a drop in the quality and frequency of sightings (previously estimated 90%, now around 50%). Although Chepu Adventures no longer offer kayak tours, apparently Chiloe Natural (tour agency) offer a variety of kayak excursions on which you're likely to come across them. There are meant to be a few inquisitive families living on the shores of the main lake in Parque Tantauco.

**Darwin's fox:** There are two habituated animals living in Parque Tantauco which show nicely to members of the public in the summer, although they're not a guaranteed sighting. Jeroen from Alihuen also mentions a site across the river from Chepu which needs at least an overnight stay (camping), and fox sightings are all but guaranteed. I only found out whilst I was on the island that a few of the smaller islands around the south of Gran Chiloe actually have wild fox populations - I'm sure these must be a better place to sight them as they're going to have more contact with humans and there's likely to be a higher fox population density on the smaller islands.

**Guiña:** Although there are 'guiña trails' in Parque Tantauco, the last sighting was over a year ago. This doesn't mean much however, given the enormity of the park. I think you have a chance here, but a more likely spot would be on La Cuy peninsula. Everyone I spoke to who lives here reports seeing guiña within the last year, although not amicably. They seem to be reasonably common throughout the island, but rarely seen. People cite them as the main reason they have dogs, and a desire to drive them back into the forest. A real pity.

**Pudu:** Common throughout the island these days. Alihuen seems a good place, Tantauco did it for me, and I've also been advised they can often be seen on the main road from Ancud to Castro.

**Monito del Monte:** I didn't meet anyone who has ever seen one alive. We found a few promising sites in Tantauco, with myrtle bushes lacking berries and other nearby berries having only been tasted, but that could have been the work of any rodent. Senda Biologico Darwin (effectively a research station, near Ancud) apparently have a population living on site which they monitor, but I couldn't get access.

*If I had two summer nights in Chiloe:*

I would spend both nights in Tantauco, with dawn kayaking for otters, and plenty of spotlighting.

*If I had seven summer nights in Chiloe:*

I'd spend five nights in Tantauco and another two in the north, ideally spending the nights at Senda Darwin, to try to 'clear up' the mammals I hadn't seen in Tantauco.



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