

# NORTH-WEST ARGENTINA: 16-31 OCTOBER 2009

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## Introduction

- Unlike many of my recent trips this was a combined birding & mammal watching trip & this undoubtedly had some impact on our limited success with mammals although several hours were spent, generally unsuccessfully, spotlighting most nights.
- I generally prefer to visit areas in autumn when mammals are often easier to see as young start dispersing. However this trip was in the austral spring at the end of the dry season when we expected mammals to be concentrated around water sources. Unfortunately the incredibly dry conditions & high temperatures, 30C even at 3900 metres, & 35C in the lowlands, made it very difficult to find mammals. In Copo NP it appeared that most mammals had disappeared into the interior of the park to look for water & spotlighting was incredibly disappointing. Based on our conversations with rangers etc it would appear that mid winter, June-July, is probably the prime time to look for mammals in the lowlands at least.
- The bright moon in the evenings certainly hampered the spotlighting & we saw very little mammal wise. By contrast, as I often find, there were lots of nightjars & we also saw several owls. In my experience if there are lots of nightjars on the road don't bother looking for mammals. As expected the one morning that I spotlighted pre-dawn (with little moon) produced far more mammals & no nightjars.
- NW Argentina has an excellent mammal fauna & we were simply unlucky. From discussions with rangers I think there are certainly good opportunities to look for species such as Chacoan Peccary, Giant Armadillo etc

Richard Webb

## Logistics

- Car hire in Argentina is expensive mainly due to the fact that no companies appear to offer unlimited mileage, most offer only 200 free kilometres per day which goes nowhere. Our additional kilometre charge at the end of the trip was £300 taking the total car hire close to £1,000 for 2 weeks for a Ford Ecosport. High clearance is very useful but 4WD was not necessary although we did get stuck in soft sand in Copo NP. If you plan visiting El Rey you will probably need 4WD in order to ford the rivers.
- Cheap accommodation is freely available everywhere & there is no need to book hotels in advance unless you are arriving somewhere on a late flight.
- The following books were all used extensively before & during the trip.
  1. **Visual Guide to the National Parks of Argentina**. 2005. Highly recommended.
  2. **Guide to the Mammals of Salta Province, Argentina**. (Mares, Ojeda & Barquez) - Line drawings only but nevertheless an extremely useful book
  3. **A Wildlife Guide to Chile** (Chester) – contains good illustrations of many species also found in NW Argentina.
  4. **Los mamíferos de la Argentina** (Parera) – Excellent photographic guide in Spanish & too heavy to carry on the field but an excellent source of reference.
  5. **Mammals of the Neotropics: Volume 2 - The Southern Cone: Chile, Argentina, Uruguay & Paraguay** (Eisenberg & Redford).

## Itinerary

- 16<sup>th</sup>
  - Midday arrival in Buenos Aires, transfer across city for internal flight from domestic airport for evening flight to Salta.
  - Arrived Salta mid-evening to find pre-booked hire car unavailable so forced to rework itinerary to return the following day.
- 17<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning along old Salta-Jujuy road.
  - Afternoon returned to Salta to collect correct hire car then drove south to El Carril & west to Payogasta. Night in Payogasta.
- 18<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning Los Cardones returning to Payogasta early afternoon.
  - Returned to Los Cardones for evening & spotlighting.
- 19<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning Los Cardones
  - Late morning-early afternoon road back towards El Carril
- 20<sup>th</sup>
  - Late afternoon/evening Los Cardones
  - Morning Los Cardones & on to Salta
  - Late afternoon/evening drove north to Jujuy & onto Yala. Late afternoon & evening Yala.
- 21<sup>st</sup>
  - Morning drive north to Tilcara
  - Afternoon continue north to Abra Pampa
  - Late afternoon west of Abra Pampa
- 22<sup>nd</sup>
  - All day west of Abra Pampa with majority of day spent around Laguna de Los Pozuelos although continued as far west as Laguna Larga
- 23<sup>rd</sup>
  - Early morning west of Abra Pampa
  - Remainder of day driving south & east to JV Gonzalez
  - Evening spotlighting NE of JV Gonzalez
- 24<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning NE of JV Gonzalez
  - Afternoon drive east to Pampa de Los Guanacos
  - Late afternoon / evening along approach road to Copo NP & on main trail within park
- 25<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning along approach road to Copo NP & on main trail within park returning to Pampas de Los Guanacos late morning
  - Late afternoon / evening along approach road to Copo NP & on main trail within park
- 26<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning along eastern edge of Copo NP returning to Pampas de Los Guanacos late morning.
  - Late afternoon / evening, returned to eastern edge of Copo NP & long spotlighting session back to Pampa de Los Guanacos
- 27<sup>th</sup>
  - Long drive NW to Calilegua NP
  - Late afternoon / evening Calilegua NP
- 28<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning, late afternoon & evening Calilegua NP
  - Middle of the day back in Libertador Gral San Martin
- 29<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning, late afternoon & evening Calilegua NP. RW remained in park all night spotlighting.
  - Middle of the day back in Libertador Gral San Martin
- 30<sup>th</sup>
  - Morning Calilegua NP
  - Afternoon, returned to Salta for evening flight to Buenos Aires
- 31<sup>st</sup>
  - Morning around Otamendi mainly along road down to Rio Parana ferry but also a brief visit to the Otamendi nature trail.
  - Afternoon returned to Buenos Aires for flight home. Steve & Karen stayed on to visit Iguacu.

## Checklist

Southern Three-Banded Armadillo	<i>Tolypeutes matacus</i>	25th - Two along Copo NP access road
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	18th - One Los Cardones 19th - Three Los Cardones 19th - One east of Payogasta 20th - One Los Cardones 21st - Two Tilcara 21st - Two west of Abra Pampa 22nd - One west of Abra Pampa
Forest Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus brasiliensis</i>	26th - One Copo NP, eastern road (RW) 29th - 7+ Calilegua NP
South Yungas Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus argentinius</i>	27th - Two Calilegua NP (SD/KB/RR) 28th - One Calilegua NP (SD/KB/RR)
White-bellied Grass Mouse	<i>Akodon albiventer</i>	22nd - One 30 km west of Abra Pampa 23rd - One 18 km west of Abra Pampa (RW)
Mouse sp		Unidentified mice seen at Yala, Copo NP & Calilegua NP.
Common Yellow-Toothed Cavy	<i>Galea musteloides</i>	21st - One 18 km west of Abra Pampa 22nd - Two Laguna de Los Pozuelos 26th - Two Copo NP
Brazilian Cavy	<i>Microcavia aperea</i>	31st - One Otamendi
Tawny Tuco-tuco	<i>Ctenomys fulvus</i>	22nd - 2+ Laguna de Los Pozuelos
Highland Tuco-tuco	<i>Ctenomys opimus</i>	18th - One Los Cardones 22nd - One 18 km west of Abra Pampa
Mountain Viscacha	<i>Lagidium viscacia</i>	18th - Two Los Cardones 19th - 11+ Los Cardones (two colonies) 20th - 6+ including suckling young Los Cardones
Jaguarundi	<i>Felis yaguarondi</i>	24th - One 13 km NE of JV Gonzalez 24th - One c.30 km east of Monte Quemado
Andean (Colpeo) Red Fox	<i>Pseudalopex culpaeus</i>	18th - One Los Cardones 19th - One east of Los Cardones
Argentinian Grey Fox	<i>Pseudalopex gymnocercus</i>	17th - One north of La Caldera 17th - Two Payogasta 18th - Three Los Cardones 19th - Payogasta 23rd - One c.75 km west of JV Gonzalez 24th - One 14 km west of Pampa de Los Guanacos
Fox sp		17th - Two between Payogasta & Cachi, probably Pampas Foxes
Mollina's Hog-nosed Skunk	<i>Conepatus chinga</i>	18th - One Los Cardones 21st - One 25 km west of Abra Pampa 23rd - One 23 km NE of JV Gonzalez 24th - One Copo NP - nature trail 24th - One Copo NP - entrance road
Bat sp?		At least two species Calilegua NP
Peccary sp	<i>Tayassu pecari</i>	26th - One Copo NP - eastern road
Guanaco	<i>Lama guanicoe</i>	17th - One Los Cardones 18th - Five Los Cardones

Vicuna	Vicugna vicugna	21st - c.25 west of Abra Pampa 22nd - c.25 west of Abra Pampa 22nd - 100s Laguna de Los Pozuelos 23rd - 10+ west of Abra Pampa
Grey Brocket	Mazama gouazoupira	25th - One Copo NP - entrance road

### Sites visited

For information, including good maps, on the national parks visited, try to obtain a copy of the excellent ***Visual Guide to the National Parks of Argentina.***

### The old Salta-Jujuy road north of La Caldera

- More a birding site than a mammal site, we visited the site to kill time while we waited for the correct hire car to become available. We did see one Pampas Fox crossing the road & Southern Yungas Forest Squirrel doubtless occurs but it can easily be excluded from a mammal trip.
- Note – it is difficult to navigate your way out of Salta if you get lost. It is worth working out the grid system before driving through it as sign-posting is almost non-existent.

### Los Cardones National Park

- Take route 68 south from Salta for c.35 kms then turn west at El Carril on route 33 towards Cachi for c.65 kms to the eastern edge of the park.
- The nearest hotel is in Payogasta about 45 km to the west. There are further options another 8 kms to the west in Cachi. We saw several Argentinian Grey Foxes around Payogasta where we stayed & saw both Argentinian Grey & Andean Red (Colpeo) Foxes along route 33 itself.
- Introduced European Hares are common in the park.
- There are two main areas to visit Valle Encantado sign-posted south from route 33 & the cactus deserts between here & Payogasta.
- The cactus deserts hold Guanaco & although we missed it Screaming Hairy Armadillo.
- Valle Encantado is excellent although it is heavily disturbed by cattle, horses, sheep & goats..
  - Take the track south off of route 33. It gradually winds down until it runs alongside a gully to the left of the road. According to the rangers this is excellent for Pampas Cat in the evening although we were unsuccessful.
  - Continue down the track until you see a large clearing on the left. We saw Highland Tucu-tuco here.
  - A little further on there is another clearing on the left with a pool. This is apparently another favoured hunting ground for Pampas Cat. Just after the pool there is another track leading off to the left. This was closed to vehicles during our stay but we walked it & it leads into another open area with pools. There is a Mountain Viscacha colony in the rocks to the right of this track.
  - Continuing past the side track you continue down the valley & we saw Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk on our first spotlighting session here. Eventually the track ends at a car park. Walking out from here gives you excellent views of a wide valley & further Mountain Viscacha colonies can be found further down the valley.

### Yala

- Another birding site c.10 kms NW of Jujuy although spotlighting could be good in the right conditions, e.g. Margay & Geoffroy's Cat have both been seen here.

- Take the road west from route 9, sign-posted to Lagunas de Yala. Follow this road for 5-6 kms when you will enter Parque Provincial Yala. It is probably worth spotlighting from the first pumping station (a small white building on the right after the last house) onwards.

### **Tilcara**

- The brick walls around the old fort visible to the east of route 9, c.80 kms north of Jujuy hold Common Yellow-toothed Cavies & occasionally Brush-tailed Viscacha Rat.
- We were there in the heat of the day & dipped but the cavies are apparently easy to find when it's cooler.

### **Abra Pampa & Laguna de Los Pozuelos**

- We spent two nights in this area based in the excellent Residencial Cesarita in Abra Pampa.
- The area immediately to the west of the town held European Hare & Vicunas.
- 18-20 km west of Abra Pampa along route 71 (on route to Laguna de Los Pozuelos) the road goes through a valley with stone walls on either side of the road. The walls on the northern side of the road hold skulking Common Yellow-toothed Cavies & we also saw Highland Tucutuco & White-bellied Grass Mouse in this area. We also found cat tracks, presumably Pampas Cat, in this area.
- Continuing west we found another White-bellied Grass Mouse c.35 kms from Abra Pampa, & also saw Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk while spotlighting in this area.
- Approximately 45 kms west of Abra Pampa you enter the wide valley containing the Laguna de Los Pozuelos National Monument. We saw several Tawny Tuco-tucos in the sandy soils of the valley & two Common Yellow-toothed Cavies by the ranger station.
- To reach the lake itself (worth if for the spectacle of vast numbers of waterbirds alone) ignore the right hand turn sign-posted to Pozuelos (this only goes to the village) & continue to the ranger station where Common Yellow-toothed Cavies can be seen. Continue west over the bridge & after 100 metres turn north along the access track. The lake is c.8 kms down this track where we saw additional Tawny Tuco-tucos.

### **Joaquin V Gonzalez.**

- Another birding site c.220 km ESE of Salta JV Gonzalez is situated in the dry chaco forest but the area around the town is unfortunately being cleared rapidly. We stayed in the Hotel Colonial for one night to break up the journey from Abra Pampa to Copo.
- We spotlighted the unpaved route 41 NE of JV Gonzalez & saw one Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk c.23 km from JV Gonzalez.
- The following morning we birded up to 30 km NE of JV Gonzalez & on the way back at 1000 had a red-phase Jaguarundi 13 km NE of the town.

### **Copo National Park**

- Copo NP lies c.500 kms east of Salta & has an outstanding mammal fauna. We had expected our visit here to be the highlight of the trip but unfortunately the incredibly dry conditions meant mammal-watching was very difficult.
- We stayed in Pampa de Los Guanacos. Entering the town from the west take the west turn on the left & there is an excellent residencial 200 metres down the road on the left. A single room was only £7 a night & the food is excellent. The owners were very helpful supplying breakfast at an unreasonably early hour & being very flexible to help us during our stay. There is a second residencial in Pampa de Los Guanacos on the left by the service station on the main road. The park authorities have recently opened accommodation in the ranger station at the entrance to the reserve itself with cooking facilities etc & had we known this in advance we would probably have stayed here.
- We visited four areas during our visit.

1. The main access road to the reserve leaves the main road c.15 kms west of Pampa de Los Guanacos (opposite the bus stop by Escuela Islas Malvinas) & heads north for c.35 km to the reserve entrance. The road is in the main good although there are some sandy stretches which you need to negotiate carefully. Unfortunately the forest is being cleared along the access road We saw Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk & two Southern Three-banded Armadillos on the first evening's spotlighting, & a solitary Grey (Brown) Brocket on the second evening. We had brief views of a Common Yellow-toothed Cavy one morning. According to the ranger Ocelot & Jaguarundi are often seen along the entrance track.
2. On reaching the reserve entrance we obtained permission to drive the 6 km trail in the reserve itself. The ranger was very helpful (being seemingly delighted to have visitors) & knowledgeable & provided lots of useful information. The 6 km trail is driveable but due to the dry conditions there were some deep sandy stretches & we got stuck in the sand. Consequently we did not complete the complete loop. We did see a single Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk & a Common Yellow-toothed Cavy. On the second afternoon we just missed a Chacoan Mara (apparently common in the reserve but not for us). The trail apparently passes a dam which is a good place to see Chacoan Peccary but it was dry at the time of our visit.
3. We briefly spotlighted from the main road between the park entrance track & Pampa de Los Guanacos & saw Pampas Fox & eye-shine from a second unidentified mammal near pools to the south of the road.
4. We also spent a morning & a long evening spotlighting session along the eastern side of the park. Head east from Pampa de Los Guanacos & then turn left (north) after 12 kilometres. This road initially goes through areas of degraded chaco & farmland but eventually enters excellent forest which goes on for miles. After 40 kms a track on the left leads to a ranger station with a nature trail behind it. We found evidence of armadillos & what were presumably Chacoan Mara along this trail without setting eyes on either. Returning to the road we drove north for a further 25 kms to a point where another road leads off to the left (west). This eventually meets another road which leads back along the western side of the park to Los Pirpintos (29 kms west of Pampa de Los Guanacos). We turned back at the junction & spotlighted back to the main road. There was lots of evidence of peccaries along this road & we had brief views of one unidentified peccary & a Forest Rabbit. We also found Giant Armadillo burrows a few kms north of the ranger station.
  - All in all Copo was very disappointing but it undoubtedly has great potential in the right conditions.

### **Calilegua NP**

- Calilegua NP lies roughly 120 kms NE of Jujuy. There are plenty of hotels c.10 kms from the park in Libertador Gral San Martin. We stayed in the Hotel Feniz (£11 for a single) & had lunch & dinner in the excellent 24-hour restaurant at the service station on the western edge of the town.
- To reach the park turn north about a km east of the town & then head north for c.8 kms to the entrance. We tried spotlighting this section several times without any success.
- Once at the entrance you can drive right through the park. We drove the road several times going several kms beyond the northern limit of the park.
- The park has an excellent mammal list including species such as Jaguar, Puma & Brazilian Tapir.
- Like everywhere else spotlighting was disappointing unless you were into owls & nightjars but we did see several Forest Rabbits on a pre-dawn drive. In the right conditions it is undoubtedly worth the effort as once the early evening traffic disappears the road is largely quiet. In addition we found lots of evidence of mammals with the tracks of at least 5 species (including Tayra & a small cat) being found along the road 11-13 kms from the entrance. I suspect they were going to drink at a ford crossing called Tres Cruces, 13 kms from the entrance, but an evening staking the stream out simply produced lots of mosquito bites.

- Tres Cruces was however productive during the day with South Yungas Forest Squirrel seen on three occasions.
- The other area likely to be worth staking out at dawn & dusk (armed with lots of repellent) is Lagunita which is reached via a trail to the east of the road c.4 kms from the entrance. Jaguars & Pumas are known to use this area so it is probably inadvisable to stake the area out alone.
- **Note:** It is important to let the rangers know what you are doing particularly if you plan spotlighting. We were stopped by a ranger, who thought we were poaching, one night.
- If spotlighting near the upper ranger station, Mesada de los Colmenas be aware that there are at least two feral cats resident in the area, & that one of them, bears a passing resemblance to a melanistic Geoffroy's Cat in some views.

### **Reserva Natural Otamendi**

- Take route 9 north from Buenos Aires to km 68 & then turn east through Ing. Romulo Otamendi. The reserve is on the right just outside the village & opens at 0900 during the week but only at 1000 on weekends. There are a number of trails leading out from the visitor centre but only one was open during our visit & that was mammal-free during our short visit.
- One of the longer trails, closed at the time of our visit, leads to a viewpoint from which Marsh Deer, Capybara & Coypu can all be seen.
- Continue past the reserve & take a sharp left followed by a sharp right. Where the tarmac ends turn left across the railway. The road continues for several kilometres through marshland to the Rio Parana. We saw Brazilian Cavy along here & I suspect it could be good for spotlighting although it is used heavily by fishermen.
- An introduced squirrel the Asiatic red-bellied beautiful squirrel *Callosciurus erythraeus* occurs in the reserve.
- See ***Neotropical Birding*** Number 3 Autumn 2008 for further details.

### **Additional sites not visited during the main trip**

#### **El Rey National Park**

- Not visited for logistical reasons not least the need to camp, the nearest hotel is 150 kms away, but by all accounts excellent for mammals including Brazilian Tapir.
- See ***Visual Guide to the National Parks of Argentina*** for further details.

#### **Reserva Ecologica Costanera Sur – visited by Steve & Karen after my departure**

- Less than a kilometre from the centre of Buenos Aires along rio de la Plata this is an excellent site for Coypu.
- Open 0800-1800 daily except Mondays & public holidays, 0800-1900 November-March.
- Bizarrely the reserve is however closed during wet weather as Steve & Karen discovered. However they still saw Coypu from the footpath along the edge of the reserve.
- See ***Neotropical Birding*** Number 3 Autumn 2008 for further details.