



Andean mountain cat – Las Vicuñas National Reserve

Chile

Altiplano – Chiloe island – Torres del Paine
– Santiago

23 April – 15 May 2024

Introduction

Three weeks in Chile with the main target to find Puma, Andean mountain cat, Garlepp's pampas cat and KodKod.

But also Darwin's fox, Marine otter and Monito del Monte was very high on my list.

I went to Chile with high expectations and no lesser than four possible lifer felines for me. Of course I didn't count on seeing all of them and I set a goal for myself that if I see Puma together with one of the other harder to see species I would be happy.

Little did I know how wrong I was with such a low set bar...

The tour was planned around these targets with 4 nights at Chiloe Island to start with. Followed by 3 nights in Puerto Natales, Patagonia - for visit Torres del Paine. Then onto 7 nights in Lauca NP at Altiplano up north. I ended everything with a couple of nights in Santiago.

At Chiloe Island I booked everything directly with the wonderful Tepuhueico Lodge

<https://www.parquetepuhueico.cl/en/the-park/>



Tepuhueico lodge

Can't recommend this place enough. It's a wonderful place perfectly located and with the best food in Chile 😊

They also picked me up at Castro airport (Chiloe island) and dropped me off at Puerto Montt airport (mainland). Everything very smoothly.

Martin Aguirre was my guide during this time and he is also the owner and run this place. We had a fun time with trapping small rodents and searched for the creatures who lives at Parque Tepuhueico on Chiloe Island.



Chiloe Island

In Torres del Paine I choosed to stay in Puerto Natales some 1½ hour driving away from the national park. I did 2 full day tours to the park with a local company named Iso100 outdoor <https://www.iso100outdoor.com/>

My guide Raphael was excellent. He spend more or less all his time in Torres del Paine and know all the Pumas in the area. We also hade radio contact with others to maximize our chances. With only 2 full days I was a little bit worried if it was enough time for a good Puma sighting. But there was no need for me to worry. The Puma population is so big nowadays that we had a lot of great sightings and even could witness a failed hunt.

There is really NO reason to pay the exorbitant amounts of money to visit the private areas. The Pumas are moving around and you will bump into them on the public roads.

Renting your own car is also a good option and the most cheap one but it´s always good with some expertise knowledge and radio contact with others.



Public road in Torres del Paine



Torre d'Agostini, Torre Central and Torre Monzino, More rare to see than Pumas due to cloudy weather...

The Altiplano part and Lauca NP/Las Vicuñas National Reserve I did with Far South Expeditions

<https://farsouthexp.com/>

This is the only company who does this tour and our excellent guide David Couve is probably the person with most experience of anyone in the world when it comes to Andean mountain cat. He is very passionate about this area. Incredibly knowledgeable and hard working. He can put in as many hours you want to find this cat for you. Nothing is guaranteed of course when it comes to one of the world's most elusive felines but David will increase your odds to the best it can get.



Lauca NP – Typical area to search for Andean cat if it's close to water and some Viscachas around

With us was also another guide – Victor Vega which is also a hard working guide and a nice company. He was with us to learn from David about the area. We also had a driver on top of this.

This part I also teamed up with two other fellow mammalwatchers, Stuart Chapman and Chris Daniels who both answered my post on mammalwatching.com for joining this tour. All in all it was a real expedition on the high plateau at around 4000m called the Altiplano.



Lauca cruzani – This is where we stayed during the week in Altiplano. Fairly comfortable with proper beds, electricity and toilet.



The high plateau is extremely beautiful with vulcanos and great views

Coming from sea level I choosed to stay an extra night in the town of Putre some 2½ hours driving from Arica.

Two nights of acclimatization instead of one who was scheduled in the itinerary.

Putre is a small town at 3500m and perfect for this purpose. I don't know how much it helped though as I was feeling quite miserable almost the whole week on the Altiplano. Slight headache, poor appetite and difficulty sleeping is all common symptoms on high altitude. This time it hit me pretty hard.



Godforsaken town of Putre

I also used the service of Albatross Birding <https://albatross-birding.com/> for two different daytours. The first one in Arica for Marine otter before my week in Lauca NP and the second one from Santiago before my flight home for the endemics Coruro and Common Degu.

Both with good guides who knew their things. Claudio Fuentes in Arica and Paula Soubllette in Santiago.

This is primarily a birding company but they have good knowledge of this three species and where to find them and a little bit cheaper than FarSouth. I took my chance with them and didn't regret it.

Anzota caves was closed at the moment for maintenance work and have been so for a while. However, my guide Claudio could talk us inside the area due to his contacts. So I was here totally alone.



Anzota caves outside Arica is a well known spot for Marine otter. Heavy waves like this is not good though as they tend to stay inside their burrows when the sea is too rough



Parque La campana 1½ hour outside Santiago is a great place for the endemic Common Degu

Overall a great mix of habitats and places. From Patagonia in the south to the Altiplano plateau in the north.

Chile is maybe not known for the amount of different species seen but rather the quality of them. There is some great mammals here and this report will show a few of them.

In the end I saw **26 species** of mammals of which **20 were lifers** and this is the story about them...

My species list

1. Andean mountain cat --- (Lifer) The highlight of the tour and one of the best mammal experiences in my whole life.

We searched both day and night for this very rare cat. In the daytime we searched in gorges and canyons for any sign of the cat. Preferable close to water and where there is a colony of it's main prey Viscachas. We saw signs (fur, tracks, faeces) at a few places.

In the night we returned to spotlight the areas where we had seen traces. We did spotlighting both from the car and on foot.

As we were 5 people in total in the field we often split up during the day with radio contact to maximize our chances.

The first 48 hours it really felt like a needle in the haystack. It's not teeming with life up here so it was far between any eyeshine at night or sightings (apart from Vicunas) during the day.

However, our luck would change on our third night. After some trash/signs that fooled us for being eyeshine I picked up another "trash" on a cliff wall. But this time I quickly realize that it was not!

Victor looked thru his binocular and said "It's a cat..."

I could clearly see him in my camera and it was indeed an Andean cat!!

All of us quickly snapped some photos before the cat left the disturbance after one minute or so.



Andean mountain cat resting on a cliff wall

There was total euphoria in the group and we couldn't believe our eyes. Out of nowhere... boom, there it was!

This was David's sixth Andean cat in his life and obviously a lifer for the rest of us.

But... we were not ready with this cat yet.

We decided to go back to the homestay and have some sleep and then wake up early morning to go back to the same place and see if the cat is still around and maybe see it in daylight as well.

We split up with radio contact and searched the cliffs and it didn't take long before I had him in my binocular. Just a couple of 100 meters from where he was yesterday night. I kind of "silent shout" to Chris and Stuart who was close by that I got the cat.

Unfortunately he decided to go inside a cave just as they arrived. The cat was gone and I was the only one who saw it. We called David and Victor on the radio and then we started a real waiting game.

From different angles we looked at the small cave entrance for the cat to come out again.

1 hour, 2 hours, 3 hours, 4 hours... nothing happened.

Strange, it should come out sometime.

David then start thinking if there is a hidden back entrance somewhere, even though it didn't look like it.

He went for a small climb and walked around to the other side of the cliffs.

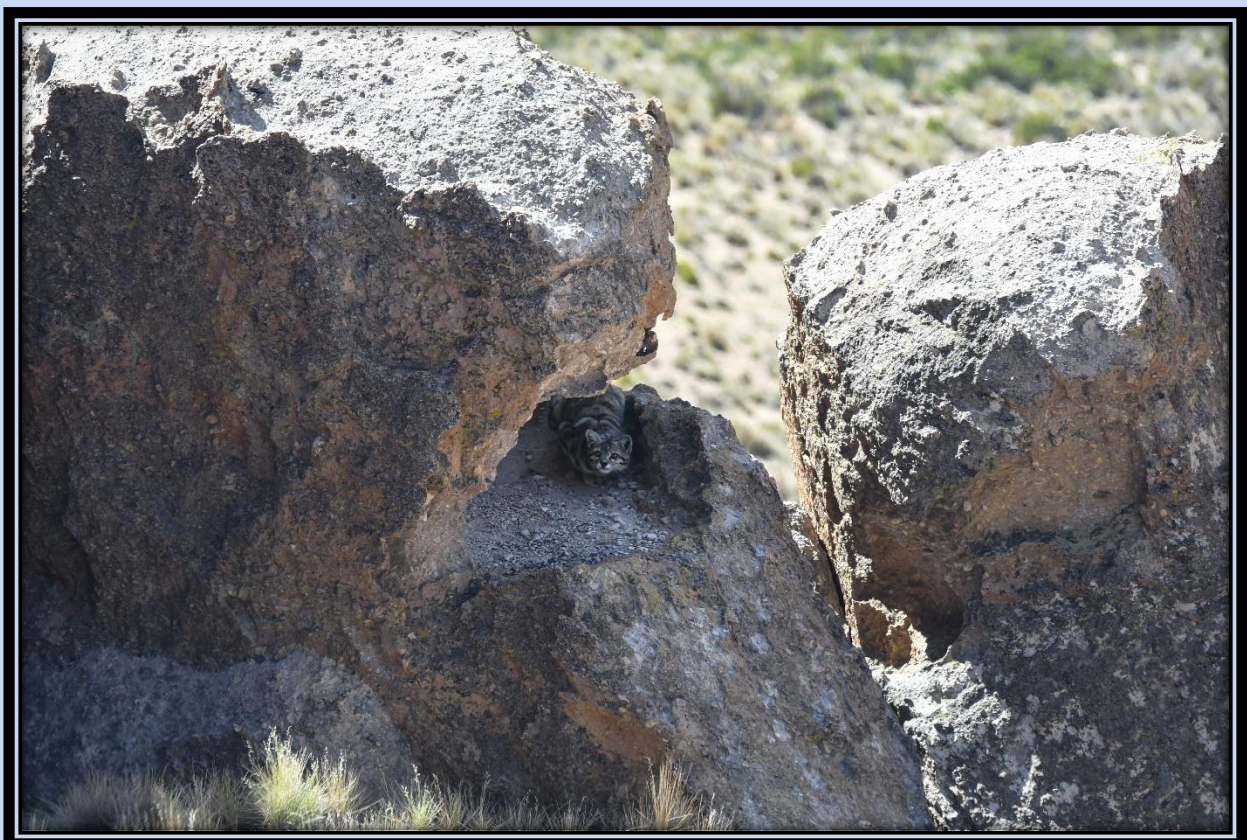
It didn't take long before he called in on the radio that the cat is here!!

We all climbed up on the cliffs and yes, there he was! And has probably been there in all this hours we have been waiting 😊

We stayed with him for about one hour and the cat almost fell asleep at one point. Very relaxed.

Unbelievable sighting and the best David ever had of this species!

Of respect to David's hard work but also the cat, we decided not to pinpoint exactly where we saw it.



Same cat as yesterday night. There was a scar on the head so he was easy to recognize



It was an honor to leave the cat after about one hour. Most of the time these elusive cats decide to leave you but not in this case. We slowly moved backwards so the cat could see us walking away.

See Stuart Chapman's video of this Andean cat: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeXklBtlq_g

2. Garlepp's Pampas cat --- (Lifer) After this excellent encounter with the Andean cat we turned the focus on the Pampas cat the rest of the days.

According to David he sees way more Pampas cats than Andean cats but still very hard to see.

The habitat where they live is a bit different from the Andean cat. We searched more in shrubby, flat areas where rodents are abundant. Salar de Surire is another good area where David has seen Pampas cats before.

We searched ALOT with spotlighting at night in potential areas and finally David got some eyeshine in his beam which was interesting. A cat was walking quite far away in a valley with shrubs like the one Pampas cats like. We could only see the shadow of it. A dark cat shape animal who immediately react on the torches and tried to sneak away. Very, very shy. I could follow him in my heat scope and the others followed the cat with the torch until it disappeared over the hill.

We could never see any color on it. Just a black shape sneaking away.

We returned the next morning in daylight but found nothing.

Then a discussion about what we saw took place. The alternatives up here is very few and Culpeo was ruled out quickly.

David who has by far most experience of Pampas cats and Andean cats was sure this was either one.

We were in a Pampas cat habitat and the way the cat was moving away very shy indicating it was a Pampas cat according to David who was 99% sure of this species. This was a typical behaviour from them when you spotlighting and he has seen it many times before.

Not a quality sighting to say at least but a sighting!

3. Puma --- (Lifer) My last “easy” species of cat left on earth. I had expected to see one or two during my 2 full days in Torres del Paine. In total I think we saw 6 different individuals along the public roads inside the park and just outside.



April/May means autumn in Patagonia and the snow who just came made up for a nice setting



Pumas are easy to see in Torres del Paine



Brown, reddish version...



Gray version

4. Kodkod --- (Lifer) This one is still haunting me a bit. I did see one very good for about 10 seconds in Parque Tepuhueico. Perfect sighting actually. But still no photo... why? Here is the story about this Kodkod...

Martin Aguirre, my guide – had a good place a bit of a driving distance from the Lodge. There was not a reliable Kodkod around the lodge at the moment since the reliable one found dead not too long ago. But there seems to pop up new ones around the lodge so hopefully they will have another one soon. So we concentrated our search for this species at another place a bit of a distance away. Where he had seen them before.

It's in the middle of the forest with like a T-cross of dirty roads.

The idea was to just wait in the middle of the T-cross and check in all three directions.

We were 3 people, me, Martin and his helping hand. So we simply checked one direction each.

We had been here the night before just to scan the area with the torches but didn't find anything.

The second night we tried this new idea.

It was quite cold and it had rained a bit. Therefore my camera was in some rain protection 10 meters away from where I was.

This was of course a bad idea... 😊

After a few very quiet hours, the clock approached midnight and suddenly I heard a dull thud very close. I put my torch towards the place and could see a beautiful, melanistic Kodkod had jumped onto a dead logg. Just 10 meters in front of me!

I got him perfectly posing on the logg for around 8-10 seconds before it jumped down and disappeared into the thick forest underground.

If I had the camera on me I would have the time for a perfect Kodkod photo!

That I never learn...

The time was 23:40 in the night when this happened.

We waited for the cat to come back (this time WITH my camera) but it never did. We got some eyeshine which very well could be the same cat about an hour later in the other direction of the T-cross but we couldn't see anything else than just the eyeshine.



The forest is thick in Parque Tepuhueico. Kodkods like it though...

5. Southern Pudu --- (Lifer) A guarantee in Parque Tepuhueico. I must have seen more than 20 individuals.
Both day and night. Very relaxed.



This one was just outside my Lodge



Sometime you could approach them to just a few meters

6. Darwin's fox --- (Lifer) Another sought after mammal for me on this trip. 3 individuals seen during my 4 nights stay. There is a habituated one who use to come to a nearby house in the evenings and the man who lives there called Martin when the fox is there.

Then we bumped into one at a walking trail at night and one on the road when walking.



Habituated female who use to come to a house in the evenings



We bumped into this fox when walking on the road in search for Monito del Monte

7. Southern river otter --- (Lifer) We struggled alot with this species. Martin use to see them at the waterfall close to the lodge. Two evenings we took a walk on the trail to get there. We waited until dark but nothing. They were simply not there.

But there is a few other places for them on the other side of the park. One hour driving away. In the end we found one in the late evening from the bridge at the small town of Cucao. This is outside the park and very close to the ocean, western coast.



Southern river otter having an evening meal



We saw him for about 15 minutes and then he went into a burrow somewhere and vanished

8. Long-tailed pygmy rice rat *Oligoryzomys longicaudatus* --- (Lifer) One captured in the traps at Parque Tepuhueico. Very long tail.



9. Long-haired grass mouse *abrothrix longipilis* --- (Lifer) Very common and we got them in the traps all the time at Parque Tepuhueico.



10. **Brown rat** --- One captured in the traps close to the lodge at Parque Tepuhueico. Invasive species.
This individual is now in the Brown rat heaven...



11. Southern Monito del Monte --- (Lifer) Frustrating mammal to see. Martin have a hot spot stretch of road for this species. Just a couple of hundred meters long but for some reason - no one knows why - this stretch is a good place for them.

We saw them two times here in the night. With torches and in the heat scope. You could see them running up and down, left and right, upside down...

But NEVER stopped and freeze like they sometimes do.

Therefore I didn't managed to get a photo.

Very frustrating as it's a great mammal.

12. Chilean myotis --- (Lifer) Unfortunately they were gone from the abandoned house Martin had found them roosting inside. Despite checking here 3 nights and also daytime we didn't found them anymore.

However, we saw a couple flying around inside another building.

Maybe they coming back some day.

13. Guanaco --- (Lifer) Very common in Torres del Paine. Main prey of the Puma together with European hares.



Guanaco enjoying the snowfall



Guanaco in fantastic landscape

14. European hare --- Seen on the road when driving back from Torres del Paine to Puerto Natales.
Introduced species.

15. European rabbit --- Seen on the road when driving back from Torres del Paine to Puerto Natales.
Introduced species.

16. Marine otter --- (Lifer) Seen at the Anzota caves outside Arica.

Despite very rough sea with big waves I managed to see two Otters who swam together. Seen inside the (at the moment) closed area of Anzota caves. There is some small coves where there is some resident Otters.

After our week in Altiplano we checked this area as well because Stuart and Chris wanted to see this Otter and we found another one along the shores before Anzota cave entrance.

Be patient and scan the water and the rocks. They are swimming back and forward and can be out of sight for long time.



17. South American sea lion --- Also in the coastal water outside Arica.

In Arica harbour it was a feeding frenzy with Sea lions taking advantage of easy food from the fishermans



18. Dusky dolphin --- (Lifer) Between Arica and the airport there is a small nature reserve called Rio Lluta. It's a fresh water stream entering the ocean and it's teeming with birds here. We had a lovely hour here before our flight. The sun was about to go down, birds everywhere and out in the ocean a pod of Dusky dolphins was feeding.



Wonderful last evening in the north before the flight back to Santiago. Dusky dolphins had a feeding frenzy in the ocean. Just as the Pelicans and other seabirds.

19. Mountain Viscacha --- (Lifer) Also called Southern Viscacha. Very common on the Altiplano plateau.

Where you find cliffs and water you probably also find Viscachas.

If you want it easy just stay by the road at Las Cuevas in Lauca NP [18°10'15.2"S 69°25'43.8"W](#)

Take the path on the other side of the road and you will encounter them after just some minutes.



20. Bolivian big-eared mouse --- (Lifer) Very attractive mouse on the Altiplano plateau. The only place we saw them was at Las Cuevas in Lauca NP [18°10'15.2"S 69°25'43.8"W](#)

Take the path on the other side of the road and you will encounter them after just some minutes.



21. Vicuna --- The most abundant mammal in Lauca NP and Las Vicunas Nature Reserve.



22. Molina's hog-nosed skunk --- Only one seen during the week at Altiplano. Late at night just outside our homestay.



23. Culpeo --- (Lifer) Also called Andean fox. Common in Lauca NP / Las Vicuna nature reserve. We saw them both day and night. 6-7 individuals in total. The first thing to do when you see eyeshine on the Altiplano is to check whether it's a cat or a fox...



24. Garlepp's mouse --- (Lifer) Seems like a fairly common rodent in Lauca NP / Las Vicunas nature reserve. When walking at night we saw several of this Hamster-like mouse with a very short tail.



25. Taruca --- (Lifer) Also called Northern Huemul. There is a small population just above the town of Putre.

When we came down from the plateau on the last day we looked for them and we were lucky. Check on the old road A149. It's a good place for them.



26. Common Degu --- (Lifer) Endemic to the central Chile. On my day trip from Santiago we searched for this species in La Campana National park.

There is a very good place close to the entrance. It's a short stone wall where they live. Here is the coordinates: **32°55'43.5"S 71°05'18.4"W**

Also check the bigger stone wall on the entrance road before you enter the park. We saw several of them here as well.

32°54'55.6"S 71°05'27.5"W



Also one bigger rodent on the Altiplano crossing the road and disappeared in a pipe which we didn't managed to identify. Otherwise I got an ID of everything I saw.

Stuff I missed

Overall a very successful trip with no less than four new felines for me. Unbelievable.

However, we missed a couple of things. In Parque Tepuhueico, Chiloe island – we didn't see **Coypu** which is fairly common at the lake close to the lodge.

On the ferry crossing from Chiloe island to the mainland you sometimes can see **Peales dolphin** and **Chilean dolphin**, none of which I saw even though I was on the lookout.

In Torres Del Paine no **South American gray fox** was seen. They are common around here. Also **Large hairy armadillo** we didn't see. My guide Raphael have a good place for them but we didn't have time to check it out.

Sometimes you also bump into **Humboldt's hog-nosed skunk**. Which we didn't.

The biggest miss was however the endemic **Coruro**. We searched for them at Batuco wetlands (Laguna de Batuco) [33°11'45.2"S 70°50'14.1"W](#) just outside Santiago. Close to the entrance there is a colony of

Coruros in the soft ground. We could see the holes everywhere.

My guide had told me before the trip that I was maybe too late in the season. The **Coruros** do like a semi-hibernating and stay in the ground when it's cold and second week in May was not optimal.

We didn't see anything except the burrows. Easy to see here in the summer though.



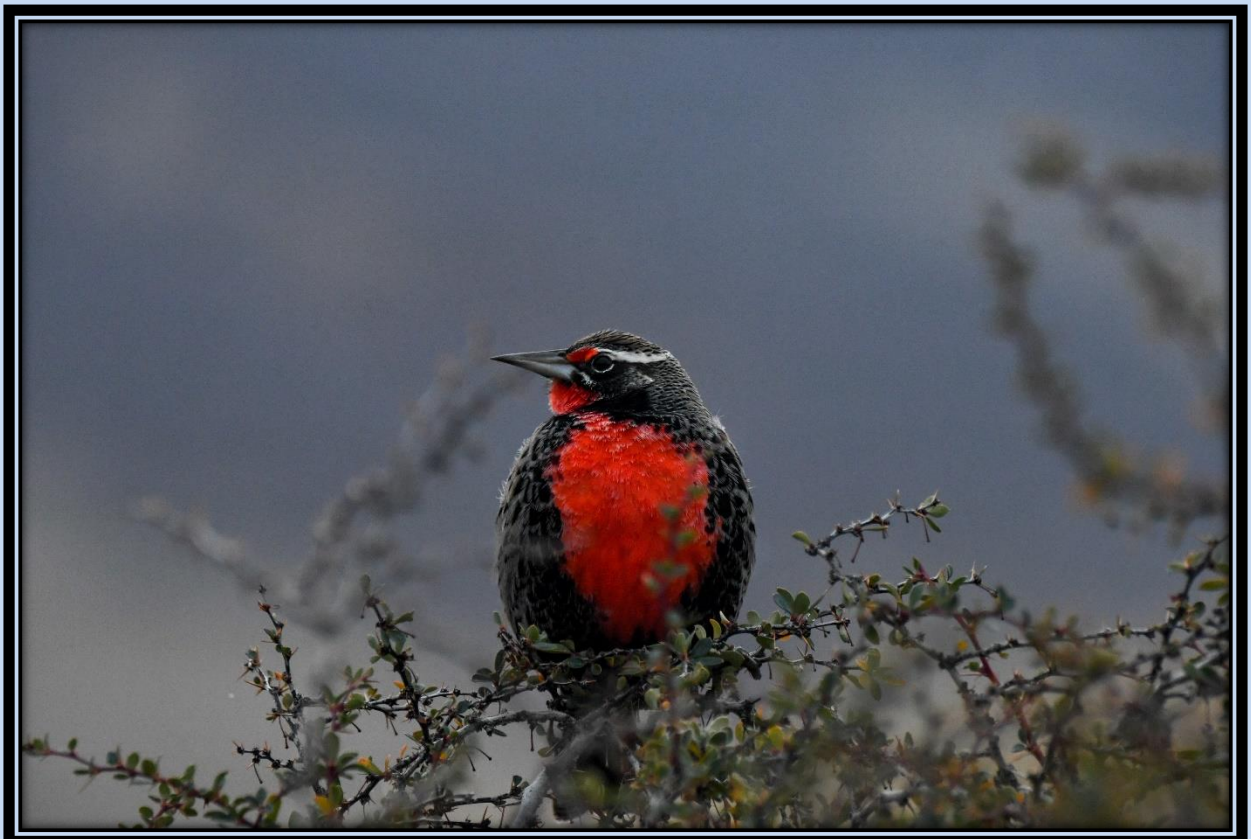
The only trace of the Coruro

All in all 20 new lifers for me with top four sightings of **Andean mountain cat, Kodkod, Puma and Darwin's fox.**

Random photos from my time in Chile



Beautiful Patagonia



Long-tailed meadowlark – Torres del Paine



Austral parakeet – Torres del Paine. Southernmost of all parrots on the globe.



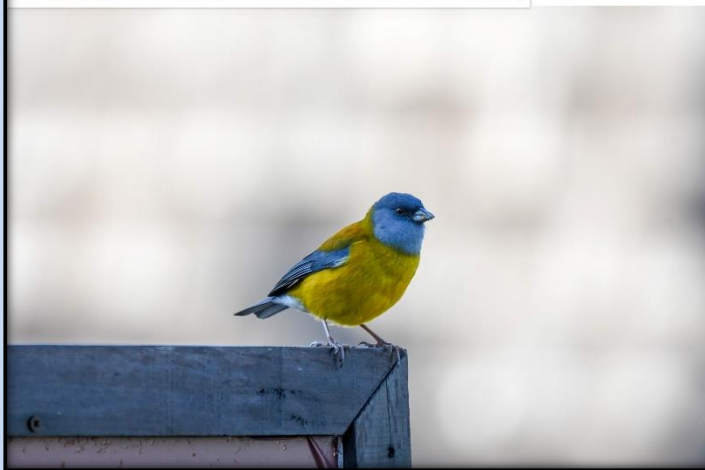
Top left: Chilean flicker
Middle: Austral blackbird
Bottom left: Black-necked swan
Right: Torres del Paine
Patagonia



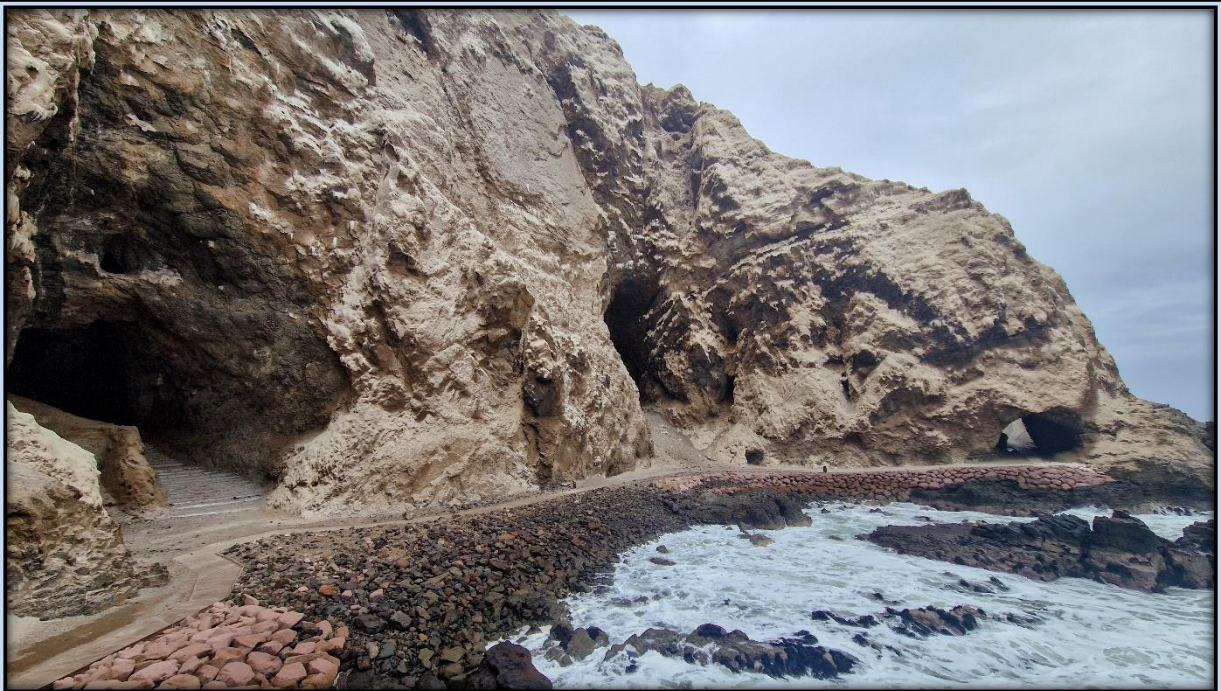
Parque Tepuhueico – Chiloé island



Chucao tapaculo take advantage of our rodent trap... - Chiloé island



Top left: Rufous-legged owl
Top right: Magellanic woodpecker
Bottom left: Patagonian sierra finch
Bottom right: Austral pygmy owl
Chiloe island



Anzota caves outside Arica. Good place for Marine otter.



Sally lightfoot crabs having a big fight. Or was it mating. Very unclear – Anzota caves



Four-banded Pacific iguana – Anzota caves



Altiplano 400m



Top left: Variable hawk

Top right: Andean goose

Bottom: Golden-spotted ground dove

Altiplano



Expedition car is fully loaded for a week in Lauca NP / Las Vicunas nature reserve



Photo credit: Victor Vega

Big thank you from me to...

- **Stuart Chapman and Chris Daniels** who responded to my post of searching people with interest to join a tour for Andean mountain cat.
Very easy going and funny people.
Without you I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't have seen this fantastic Andean cat.
So thanx again for joining!
- **Huge thanx to David Couve** for all the expertise help in finding the Andean cat and for a great company!

- Also thanx to Victor Vega for all the help and the whole Far South Expedition team.
- Thank you Raphael for 2 amazing days with the Pumas in Torres del Paine.
- Thanx Martin Aguirre for the hard work at Tepuhueico lodge. Some fantastic days in changeable weather to say the least.
- Thank you Albatross birding team for setting up two great day tours with my guides Claudio and Paula.

Species list – Chiloe island

Southern Monito del Monte
 Chilean myotis
 Southern Pudu
 Kodkod
 Long hair grass mouse (abrothrix longipilis)
 Long tailed pygmy rice rat (Oligoryzomys longicaudatus)
 Brown rat
 Darwin's fox
 Southern river otter

Species list – Torres del Paine

Puma
 Guanaco
 European hare
 European rabbit

Species list – Lauca NP / Las Vicunas nature reserve

Vicuna
 Bolivian big-eared mouse
 Mountain viscacha (Southern viscacha)
 Andean mountain cat
 Garlepp's pampas cat
 Molina's hog-nosed skunk
 Culpeo (Andean fox)
 Taruca (Northern huemul)
 Garlepp's mouse

Species list – Anzota caves / Arica / Santiago area

Marine otter
 South American sea lion
 Dusky dolphin
 Common Degu

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