

Buenos Aires province 11/2024

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After 17 visits to Argentina over the course of 15 years, I still had only 30 species for the country as of early November 2024. On the one hand, yes, I have frequently visited one place over and over (except for a few larger trips) and observed mostly birds in that dark period of my life, but on the other hand, it was getting embarrassing. And so Jon's report of mammals in BA province could not have appeared at a better time. In the meantime, I did finally bring a thermal camera to Argentina already this April and thus checked off a Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk in Malargüe (Mendoza province, the aforementioned "one place"), but there were quite a few potential lifers remaining on Jon's BA list.

And not just species: there were two *families* on that list I was missing – and I have been recently talking too much to Alex Meyer to simply let that go. So I decided to extend my unusual second work trip of the year with a few days to travel south of BA. Funnily enough, Alex visited the very same places just a week or so ahead of me – so I was receiving the news of his successes while already in Argentina, getting even more excited about the whole project. Even more funnily, after having heard Tuco-tucos in BA, I am almost sure that the weird sound I heard during one night of my Malargüe "pre-trip" was probably one of those as well. But I have no recordings and never found any burrows in that area. So let's say I was going into the BA trip with two families to get.

BA province is just a small part of Argentina – but Argentina is large, so this small part of it is actually roughly the size of Poland. Already this tells you that trying to fit Jon's one-week itinerary into three days (or if you ask Hertz, four, because it was 3 days and 5 hours of booking) may have been ill-advised. But then again, I used to live in Poland and would regularly do 1000+ kms of driving for a "weekend" trip, so the problem with me may run deeper.



Screaming Hairy Armadillo

Charging an extra day for just 5 hours did not stop Hertz from keeping me waiting an extra hour for the car, even after I already arrived an hour late, because Flybondi cancelled my flight from Mendoza on a day's notice and I had to book a new one with Aerolineas Argentinas (a company that will not let you take a bag over 15 kg, no matter what, so I had to distribute a lot of cargo to colleagues and still book an extra bag and send just my tent separately). Btw. If you ever hurry from Aeroparque to Ezeiza so much that you don't have time for the civilized option of a bus, follow my lead and take an Uber, it's much cheaper than what the taxi crooks hanging around offer.

Even with the delay, I arrived at El Manantial just around sunset. The place is now far from being as crazily cheap as Jon's report would have you believe, but that is just Argentina in 2024 – the inflation continued but somehow the (informal) exchange rate in November is back to April levels, so everything costs double in dollars now. Still, 40 bucks for this amount of pampering (and property access) is quite exceptional. I mean, seriously, tomato *jam*?

From Jon's report, I knew that some animals were only seen by driving around the roads outside of the farm, but I simply could not resist the opportunity to just walk around – without fancy guides and their fancy access to private lands, this is actually a pretty rare opportunity in lowland Argentina, as *everything* is private and fenced off here. A couple hours at night brought a number of **Hairy Armadillos**, both **Large** and **Screaming** (lifer). I found it pretty clear which animals were not Large Hairy, but some of those felt quite a bit larger than others, so I was surprised to learn that all were Screaming and none 7-banded. There were **Hares**, **Pampas Fox**, **Coypu** and an unidentified deer. It is still not clear to me how far the property extends, but there were unlocked gates in fences as far as I was willing to walk.



Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk

I came back some hour after sunrise and there was **Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk** running around on the track. Already in the night I noticed a lot of holes in the ground – while the bigger ones were from

armadillos, I had high hopes for the smaller ones, which were quickly validated in the morning through the telltale calls of **(Talas's) Tuco-tuco**. Even after two hours and endless calls, I saw no animals; this may have had something to do with the fact that the plan of “quietly sitting down to watch the burrows” failed gloriously due to absolute hordes of mosquitoes making me constantly move around. Anybody who knows me understands that after living in Poland, I am pretty hardened in this respect, but this was really something else. There is no real risk of a disease here (with the only real contender being dengue, which is unlikely in such a sparsely populated area) so I let myself be bitten without worry, but it was still pretty terrible.

I moved to Punta Rasa to look for Franciscana. Immediately after the turnoff to the actual cape, I turned around, considering the road impassable in a sedan. An older lady in a similar car drove right through the “impassable” place, only to come back soon, claiming the road ahead to be even worse. With only 5 kilometers left, I set out on foot – to see that the road indeed was very bad, but also surprisingly full of sedans whose drivers didn't seem to mind. Am I getting soft?

At the cape, I found a huge sweeping sandy flat, very different from the Google satellite image. That prompted me to study the image some more and realize that on it, not only the entire beach, but also the entire 5-kilometer access road I just walked (including the place where my car was parked) was underwater. That made me check the tide forecast and note that, first, the water would be 2 meters higher in just shy of 6 hours and, second, I was not seeing many 2-meter-high terrain features around me. I still don't know if the entire area (which included several large party tents) floods on every high tide or not, but I consider it wise that I hadn't stuck around to find out. After filling my quota of pointlessly scanning the sea and seeing no dolphins, I was sunburned enough anyway.

From Mar del Ajó, the “old road 11” cuts WSW through a large area of wetlands and cattle. As I predicted, the area has quite a few easily driveable dirt roads – but note that there are signs prohibiting driving “on days with rain” on all access points. I set my tent at Pesquero la Nueva Tablada – inexplicably for free and if I understood Mariano correctly (which was far from easy), I could even have had a room for free; they also offer boat rides and whatnot. If the whole area was in many aspects basically a small Pantanal (minus the more exciting animals), this was the local variation on Rio Claro (minus the fancy lodge).

Driving around produced more **skunks, foxes, hares** and **(Large Hairy) armadillos**, with the addition of **Brazilian Guinea Pigs**, a weirdly single **Capybara** and an unidentified mouse. After the short sleep in El Manantial, I was really tired, so I called it quits quite early, which I regret, because the area felt like it had a lot of potential. Maybe next time. Being alone in a car meant I could not use IR while driving (even though *some* people reportedly do that); I tried to spotlight from my window while driving (like Eliška does) and stop-and-scan with IR, but basically found all animals straight ahead in headlights.

I was contemplating staying in this area, but the forecast for next evening was rain – not only would I be breaking the ban on driving (and risking fines, as the signs promised), but it would be, well, raining. So I moved along the coast all the way to Necochea, stopping at Pinamar, Mar Chiquita and Mar del Cobo to scan fruitlessly for dolphins. I camped in the marvelous public campsite in Arenas Verdes, a tiny cluster of mostly resorts in a eucalyptus forest amidst coastal dunes. From here, a road follows the coast to Necochea – as the rain was already finished here, this allowed me extended views of the dolphinless ocean. In the morning, the camp warden told me that the dolphins were there only until August/September – I am not sure about the extent of the area she had in mind, probably only around Necochea, as Alex saw them in Mar Chiquita the previous week.



South American Fur Seal

After reaching the shorter eastern breakwater of Puerto Quequen, I quickly understood what a “sea-lion colony on the western breakwater” was supposed to mean – really just **South American Sea Lions** lying around right next to the breakwater road. But I also saw pinnipeds on the outside tip of the western breakwater, where Jon's report promised **South American Fur Seals**, a species that I only had one old and disputed observation of – and in the distance, the animals looked promising.

It took me half an hour to actually drive all the way to the western breakwater. It was Sunday and the place was full of people who – in a truly Argentinian fashion – mostly just drove to the end of the road, turned back and left. Jon claims that the fur seals are not visible from land, but I would not be so easily discouraged. The way to see them is simple – at the turnaround, first carefully study the signs prohibiting the climbing of the sea wall (which is made of these classic 4-pointed concrete contraptions as everywhere else), then climb the sea wall and look ahead – from there, I saw some in a reasonable distance. (Google maps has a drone photo from the tip of the breakwater with a huge group that I definitely did not see.) Another attractive option is, after narrowly avoiding your death while climbing back down from the wall, to look into the water and see one fur seal swimming close by, which also might have happened to me.

My primary reason for going all the way to Necochea was, however, again Jon's report, which contains a link that brings the unsuspecting reader to a location of a school on Google Maps – in front of which a Dune Tuco-tuco burrow is to be found. In reality, the place doesn't seem to contain any school, nor, for that matter, any kind of surface appropriate for a non-pneumatic tuco-tuco to burrow in. Certainly one of the more surreal sites I mistakenly visited. I later tried to look for Dune Tuco-tuco around Arenas Verdes – the only reasonable burrows I found were in a small park “downvillage”, but there weren't even any calls.

With the rain gone, I took to the dirt roads to the north after sunset. The landscape was mainly very large contiguous fields of some kind of grain that were too dense to see anything in them, but also many were already harvested and animals would come running around the roads anyway. During my first stop-and-scan with IR, I found a **skunk**; subsequent efforts brought many **hares** and a few **foxes**. What was however fascinating was the sheer number of **Large Hairy Armadillos** – so large that I am now the second biggest LHA observer on iNat! Some were just running across the dirt roads, but the real extent of the problem was only apparent upon stopping – at one place I saw no less than

11 armadillos in IR from one place. And they were not very shy – in fact, the closest two were furiously copulating, which, incidentally, is an interesting acoustic experience.

Even after the rain, the dirt roads were pretty good – until they suddenly weren't. Without much warning, I drove onto a very soft surface and was just about able to get safely back to solid ground. This sufficiently discouraged me to call it a night; the next day's long drive back to BA brought nothing of note.

Even the most generous interpretation of my "trip list" has only 13 items:

Large Hairy Armadillo

Screaming Hairy Armadillo

Pampas Fox

Brown Hare

Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk

Coypu

Capybara

Brazilian Guinea Pig

South American Sea Lion

South American Fur Seal

Tallas's Tuco-tuco (heard only)

mouse sp.

deer sp

Besides the sad lack of Franciscanas, I completely missed Plains Viscachas, which I was expecting to be quite easy. I also did not find any bat roosts (and never even noticed a bat flying).

Obviously, having a passenger would mean a night and a day – in a landscape where driving makes the most sense, being alone is a big disadvantage. But a large effect must have been the inability to enter the farms except for El Manantial – this is where people with local guides will have the upper hand. In my experience from Argentina, the fence does not necessarily mean that a visitor would be kicked out – after all, they exist primarily to keep the animals in – but you never know and probably don't really want to test that at night.



Large Hairy Armadillos