Eagle-Eye Tours



Patagonia Wildlife Safari 2024 Trip Report

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Fresh off the Iguazu pre-tour extension, Adam and I opted to start the Patagonia Wildlife Safari a few hours early in order to afford people the opportunity to visit the wonderful Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve on the waterfront of downtown Buenos Aires. This proved to be a worthwhile bonus since the past year has seen a major boardwalk addition to the park infrastructure. We were treated to great looks at several species of waterfowl that we would not encounter again on this safari: Fulvous Whistling-Duck, all three coot species, Spot-flanked Gallinule, Masked Duck, Ringed Teal, and a good selection of landbirds, including Small-billed Elaenia, Masked Gnatcatcher, Green-barred Woodpecker, Harris's Hawk and Snail Kite.



Masked Duck © Paul Prior

Our second day presented us with pretty much the only rain of the entire trip, and so the morning was spent prepping for our first flight south. We'd been informed by Carina (our guide-to-be, stationed down in Trelew) that we needed to move our planned whale-watching cruise forward a day. High winds were predicted for both of our full days at Peninsula Valdes. With this in mind, we all repacked appropriately and by early afternoon had been met by Carina and our driver (Viktor) at the airport. We drove straight to the whale-watch office in Puerto Piramides where we were fitted with lifejackets and were soon nose-to-nose with mum and calf Southern Right Whales! Amazing .. and we still had ample time to ogle the Magellanic Cormorants, our first Snowy Sheathbills, Blackish Oystercatchers and loafing mobs of South American Sea Lions.



Southern Right Whale © Paul Prior

Day three was much more relaxed, but extremely windy (- good call, Carina!). We took to the road and drove over the Valdes Peninsula in search of Patagonian Mara, Guanacos, Lesser Rhea, Elegant Crested Tinamous, Variable Hawks, and our first non-Rufous-Hornero Furnariids: Sharp-billed Canastero and Common Miner. Surprises came in the form of Darwin's Nothura and a recently fledged Scale-throated Earthcreeper who tried to join us in our van. Along the coast, we encountered Magellanic Penguins at their nest-burrows, a herd of Southern Elephant Seals loafing on the beach below Punto Cantor, the latter contrasting with the cute-as-a-button Southern Dwarf Cavies found around the carpark.



Elegant-crested Tinamou © Adam Kent



Magellanic Penguin © Adam Kent



Southern Dwarf Cavy © Joe S

The following day saw us transferring from the beachfront of Puerto Piramides to the suburbs of Puerto Madryn via some rather windblown birding at Mirador Isla de los Pajaros (more Elegant Crested Tinamous, this time with elegantly-crested chicks!) and lunch with the whales at Reserva Doradillo. The latter location also provided us with our main interaction with the endemic Carbonated Sierra-Finch. The relentless wind had made the day rather tricky birding-wise, but the

just offshore looks at almost twenty Southern Right Whales had been difficult to pull ourselves away from. As we approached Puerto Madryn Viktor pulled over to give us great looks at a group of Burrowing Parakeets on a roadside fence.



Elegantly Crested- Tinamou © Paul Prior

Our last day in Chubut Province was somewhat improvised but presented us with some real highlights. The rather bleak landscape that Viktor drove us across didn't look too promising, but then Carina presented us with a most unexpected pair of Lesser Horned Owls at the nest!



Lesser Horned Owl © Paul Prior



Success with the owl © Paul Prior

Then to the beach near Isla Escondida, and more loafing Southern Elephant Seals but this time close enough to watch the flies dicing with death-by-inhalation in the seals' nostrils. Nearby a pair of Chubut White-headed Flightless Steamer-Ducks provided us with an all-important endemic tick.



Elephant Seals loafing on beach © Paul Prior

Upon our return north to Trelew we made a little detour to visit the always excellent Laguna De

Ornitologos. The visit did not disappoint: 3000 Red Shoveler, 1500 Chilean Flamingos, plus goodies such as Black-headed Duck and Spectacled Tyrant. And then it was off to the airport for our next flight south, this time down to Ushuaia.



Waterfowl and flamingos at Laguna Ornitologos © Paul Prior

Perfect sailing conditions greeted us the next morning. We headed to the docks, boarded our catamaran and settled in for a few hours cruising the famous Beagle Channel. Our vessel visited a few select islands, presenting great looks at large colonies of Imperial Cormorants and smaller cliff-side colonies of Magellanic Cormorants. Sheathbills, Chilean Skuas, Kelp and Dolphin Gulls scavenged among the nesting birds and Southern Sea Lions. The wind was light enough to not rock the boat, but stiff enough to allow numbers of Southern Fulmars, Giant Petrels and a few Black-browed Albatrosses to get aloft. As we drew level with the Eclaireurs Lighthouse, we were joined on board by three Blackish Cinclodes – other than a trip to the Malvinas, a visit to this little islet is about the only way to easily see this species.



Black-browed Albatross © Paul Prior

Finally, we reached Isla Martilla; the captain nosed the prow of the catamaran onto the shallow beach and the 40 or so passengers rotated along the deck to get the best looks at the colony of 90 or so Gentoo Penguins. On the beach - if you could pull your eyes away from the ever-appealing penguins – were several Upland Geese, nesting Chilean Skua, and preening Flightless Steamer-Duck. On the way back the wind picked up significantly and most people retreated to the lower deck and assorted snacks. Back in town our local operator taxied us up to the base of the Glacier Martial ski slope where we embarked on the hike uphill. Recent snow meant that the area was rather birdless, but we did encounter our first of the delightful Thorn-tailed Reyadito, several Austral Thrushes, Black-chinned Siskin, Patagonian Sierra-Finch, and a rather unexpected Buff-winged Cinclodes. The evening presented the opportunity to indulge in an excellent parilla supper and more of the equally excellent Argentinian malbecs.



En route from Glacier Martial © Paul Prior

Our departure day from Ushuaia had rolled around quite quickly but first, this morning we took an early morning hike along the lakeside trail at Lago Roco in the Tierra Del Fuego National Park. Even before we reached the trailhead, one of our number had spotted a handsome male Magellanic Woodpecker for all of us to enjoy. The hike took us into an exquisite fairytale woodland, large Southern Beech Trees festooned with lichens of pastel greys and green, dappling sunlight picking out the emerald, copper and bronze of moss and ferns.



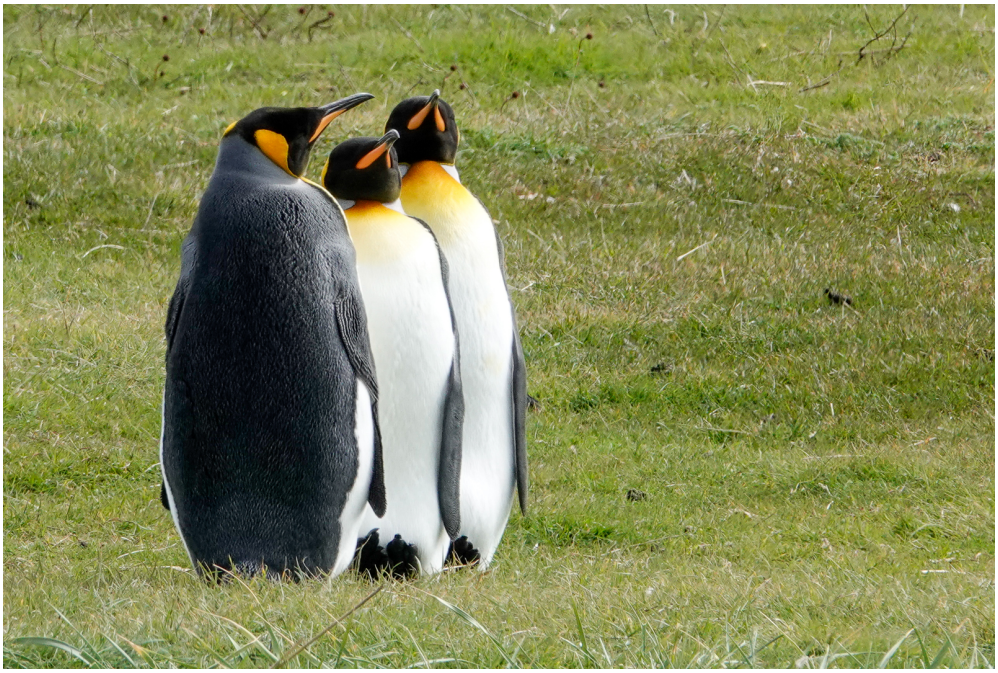
Southern beech forest at Tierra del Fuego National Park © Paul Prior

Some whistled hooting worked like a charm, attracting inquisitive Tufted Tit-Tyrants, Black-chinned Siskin, White-crested Elaenias, and then to our surprise an actual Austral Pygmy-Owl! We continued along the trail, listening for the distinctive calls of our remaining target, and sure enough we were soon joined by a pair of White-throated Treerunners. What an excellent morning. We headed back to the vans, fetched our luggage from the hotel and left Ushuaia behind us as we headed back over to the east side of the Andes via Paseo Garibaldi, and on to the gas-town of Rio Grande, on the far side of the vast Tierra del Fuego plain but via a pleasant stop at the famous bakery in Tolhuen. Our local guide Agustin was waiting for us with his daughter at the Rio Grande gas station and he led the way back out across the plain to Estancia Miranda. We scoured the salina's shoreline and soon picked out a pair of Magellanic Plovers (from here on known as "Magic Plovers") foraging along the upper beach with dozens of Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers, and a few Two-banded Plovers. We made the most of this rare encounter, distracted at one point by Short-billed Miners, and then we turned our attention and our scopes to the distant geese up on the estancia. The flock was mostly Ashy-headed and Upland, but mixed in were four of the much scarcer Ruddy-headed Geese. It had been another long day and we arrived quite late at our Rio Grande hotel but tomorrow: Chile! Or so we thought.



Pair of Magellanic Plovers © Paul Prior

First thing today we met Agustin again for a stroll along the Rio Grande beach on a rising tide. Perfect conditions for pushing hundreds of Hudsonian Godwits higher up the beach, allowing great views and the opportunity to pick out a few dozen Red Knot and one local rarity: a Surfbird! From here, having loaded our lunch from a local bakery we headed for the frontier at San Sebastian, itching to make it fast into Chile. But the border security officials had other plans: long story short – it took 24 hours to get the entire group across the border! Sadly, we lost an entire day, with just three of us spending the night as planned at Cerro Sombrero, but the bulk of the group not making it through until midday on day nine.



The 3 King Penguins © Paul Prior

Moving swiftly on… the group was reunited on the right side of the Chilean frontier where our new driver extraordinaire, Robert, drove straight to Pinguino Rey reserve where the sight of a couple o' dozen King Penguins helped put the lost day out of our thoughts. From here we drove to the ferry that would take us across the Strais of Magellan, a very short crossing but we all made for the upper deck in the hopes of spotting some goodies. Sure enough, halfway across the Strait, we were joined by a small pod of the delightful Commerson's Dolphins playing in our bow wake, and then a couple of lucky participants managed to get a brief look at a Magellanic Diving-Petrel. A nice leisurely start to our tenth day allowed people to stroll the Puerto Natale shoreline in the company of multiple broods of Black-necked Swans. In late morning we began our drive to the fabled Towers of Blue (Torres del Paine). We were soon driving alongside tall cliffs where we stopped for our first proper looks at several Andean Condors, joined by the occasional and somewhat dwarfed Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle.



Andean Condor on our approach to Torres del Paine © Paul Prior

Robert drove us along the winding road towards the park entrance, stopping at small wetlands to try to coax Austral Rails into view – so close, but always invisible. Scanning the wide open plain, we found small numbers of Ochre-naped, Cinnamon,-bellied, and White-browed Ground-Tyrants joining the numerous Austral Negritos; a pair of Chilean Flickers, Caracaras galore (both Crested and Chimango), and much to our delight another Big Hairy Armadillo. Again, checking the small wetlands as we drove along we managed to find our first Chiloe Wigeon and our only pair of Spectacled Ducks. Today the towers themselves remained obscured by cloud, but the view from our hotel promised great things.



Darwin's Slipper Orchids © Paul Prior

Day 11 was to be our day with the puma-trackers. We met them at the Amarga entrance, picked up our CB radio, and headed back into the park, all eyes working the hill sides for any mobile beige boulders. We worked hard, as did our guides, Nico and Pepe, but as we drove the winding lanes it became obvious that everybody else was having the same lack of luck. Under the constant gaze of the spectacular Torres, with plenty of scenic and wildlife distractions – dust-bathing Guanacos, courting Black-faced Ibis, weird alien-looking Darwin's Slipper orchids, Spectacled Tyrants, and Grey-hooded Sierra Finch – the long day seemed all too short! Nico radioed us the news that a pair of Torrent Ducks had been seen at the nearby rapids and so we rushed on over and spent a long while watching these amazing birds, seemingly doing impossible things in the swift currents.



Torrent Duck surveying his domain © Paul Prior

We broke for lunch and a siesta, but the second shift also drew a blank, making do with ever improving views of the towers, Cinereous Harriers, Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail at its nest, excellent looks at a pair of Rufous-tailed Plantcutters, our first Grey-bellied Shrike-Tyrant, and of course the ever-present Chingolo – Rufous-collared Sparrow. Nico was crestfallen and unnecessarily apologetic; we knew that we were not alone in failing to find the big cat.



Rufous-collared Sparrow © Paul Prior

A later start had us taking the road west towards Lago Gray. We arrived in good time and spent the first little while searching successfully for the Austral Pygmy-Owl that Nico had kindly told us about. We then skirted the hotel grounds and found a pair of canoodling Austral Parakeets.



Austral Parakeets © Paul Prior

After a hearty lunch at the Pingo restaurant, we braved the near gale force winds and hiked through the beech forest to the edge of the broad shingle plain. While some of us stayed back and marvelled at the globally endangered Giant Bumblebees, a few hardy souls trudged all the way out across the

shingle for views of the Gray Glacier.



The endangered Giant Bumblebee © Paul Prior



The view from Lago Grey © Paul Prior

On our last full day in Patagonia, Robert drove us back towards the coast via the Cueva de Miledon, where we made the short hike to the impressive cavern, still in search of birds. After lunch in Puerto Natales we started the long drive to Punta Arenas, where before checking in to our last hotel we

stopped at the Humedal Tres Puentes wetlands where spring was in full swing with broods of Coscoroba Swans, and incubating Red-gartered Coots, Upland Geese and Flying Steamer-Ducks. Finally, Robert dropped us at our hotel. We enjoyed another excellent supper at a nearby restaurant, and – knowing that the group had several different departure times for the following day – we bade fond farewells. What a trip, as ever full of surprises, and once again, it was made a huge success because of the wonderful people involved. Thank you so much to everybody.



The group on our last day in Pehoe © Paul Prior

Patagonia Wildlife Safari species list 2024