



## Patagonia Wildlife Safari Trip Report 2022

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Frankly, it is a fool's errand to attempt to distil our Patagonia Wildlife Safari 2022 into just a few hundred words and a dozen pictures. So much ground was covered, so many habitats explored, so much was seen. Hopefully the creatures mentioned here will be enough to inspire you to dig much deeper. **Day 1** Steve and I met the entire group in the mid-afternoon for a stroll along the promenade that borders the western edge of Costanera Sur. A good opportunity to familiarize ourselves with a wide selection of waterfowl (**Rosy-billed Pochard, Silver Teal, Southern Screamer** - with chicks - **Rufescent Tiger-heron**, and three **Coot** species) and some of the northern birds which we'd be leaving behind as we headed south (**Harris's Hawk, Monk and Nanday Parakeets, Picazuro Pigeon, Yellow-browed Tyrant**). From here we walked back towards our hotel via the first of many excellent suppers, on a wharf-side patio. **Day 2** After breakfast we were taxied back down to Costanera Sur, this time heading out on a very birdie two-hour hike into the Reserve, affording plenty of close-up looks at birds that have become somewhat habituated to people in this busy city-park. The wetland held more waterfowl species including **Black-headed Ducks, White-faced Whistling-duck, White-tufted Grebes**; while the surrounding vegetation provided great looks at **Yellow-chinned** and **Sooty-fronted Spinetails, Golden-billed Saltator, Glittering-bellied Hummingbirds, Rufous-browed Pepper-shrike, Rufous-and-black Warbling-finch**, among many others. Steve even managed to pull out a rare, personal life-bird, a **Warbling Doradito**. Meanwhile, we were also seeing pretty much the only herpetofauna we could expect for the entire trip: **Hilaire's Side-necked Turtle, Black-bellied Slider**, and an **Argentinian Black-and-white Tegu**.



*Hilaire's Side-necked Turtle © Paul Prior*

We taxied back to the hotel, then transferred to the Aeroparque in time for our flight south and the real start of our Patagonian adventure. Our local guide was waiting for us in Trelew, and as we began our drive to Puerto Piramides she provided an informative narrative about the various histories of the area: the Welsh settlers, the indigenous people, and even the dinosaurs! We stopped briefly at the life-sized roadside statue of the Argentinosauros, and then pulled off the highway for great looks at **Burrowing Parakeets**. We bypassed Puerto Madryn and took the road east out towards Peninsula Valdez, past displaying **Carbonated Sierra-finches**, and spying **Southern Right Whales** offshore. Stopping at one beach look-out to scan for whales we had to make do with somewhat smaller mammals: **Southern Dwarf Cavies**.



**Day 3** Kitted-out with the required life vests we made out to the beach and boarded our stranded vessel, which was then pushed out into the receding tide by tractor! Almost immediately we encountered a pair of **Magellanic Penguins**, swimming and fishing offshore, and then, very quickly, our captain found us a mother and calf **Southern Right Whale** which we stayed with for about half an hour as they loafed at the surface and moved across the bay. From here we steamed over to the raised rock-beach where **Imperial** and **Magellanic Cormorants** roosted alongside **Southern Sea-lions** and **Snowy Sheathbills** foraged for tasty morsels. It was a short voyage filled with wildlife, but now we had other places to be.



*Southern Right Whale © Paul Prior*

We headed out of Puerto Piramides up onto the peninsula proper past our first **Guanacos** and **Nandos (Lesser Rheas)**, and the weird endemic **Patagonian Mara**. The long drive across the peninsula took us to an off-road lunch-stop where we got excellent looks at the first of the safari's four Canastero species (**Patagonian Canastero**), **Mourning Sierra-finches**, and both **Chalk-browed** and **Patagonian Mockingbirds**. At the Calletta Valdez lookout we were treated to the trip's only **White-banded Mockingbird**, **Elegant Crested Tinamou**, and a view of the masses of beached, **Southern Elephant Seals**, mostly cows and pups, but with several lingering bulls trying their luck.



*Patagonia Mara © Paul Prior*



*Bull Elephant Seal © Paul Prior*



*Magellanic Penguin © Paul Prior*

Meanwhile, both **Southern** and **Northern Giant Petrels** patrolled the beach, but despite much scanning, no Orcas were spotted. The drive continued along the coast to our first **Magellanic Penguin** colony where we also encountered our second **Canastero: Sharp-billed**. The long, late afternoon drive back to Puerto Piramides took us past pole-perched **Variable Hawks**, and a very cooperative **Burrowing Owl**.



*Burrowing Owl © Paul Prior*

**Day 4** Early this morning a local bird lover provided us the opportunity to view **White-throated**

**Cachalote** at her garden feeder, and the semi-desert scrub behind her house brought us our first **Tufted Tit-tyrant** and fleeting views of a **Plain-mantled Tit-spinetail**. Further along the road another very obliging **Burrowing Owl** competed for our attention versus a pair of handsome **Black-crowned Monjitas** and a **Lesser Shrike-tyrant**. It was now time to head to Trelew, enough ahead of schedule to enable the group to visit a couple of city-parks where we found **Blue-and-yellow Tanager** and a nice assortment of wading birds: **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Black-necked Stilts**, **Southern Lapwings**, and **White-faced Ibis**.



*White-faced Ibis © Paul Prior*

Finally, we spent the hour prior to our airport arrival at the Laguna Chiquachunga, primarily in an unsuccessful search for a couple of wetland passerine species, but making do with rafts of **Red Shovelers**, **Lake Ducks**, **Speckled Teal**, and a handful of lingering **Chilean Flamingos**. Several of our group took this opportunity to explore the nearby Egidio Feruglio Museum of Paleontology. And then we were southbound landing in Ushuaia in the late afternoon and hooking up with our new local guide. **Day 5** We joined our local guide for a hike along the Lago Roca in the Tierra del Fuego National Park. We had one particular target in mind but en route we were treated to great looks at **White-crested Elaenia**, **Patagonian Sierra-finch**, **Thorn-tailed Rayadito**, and close-ups of **Upland Geese** and **Great Grebes**. Our target bird, **Patagonian Tyrant**, responded immediately to Marcelo's broadcast and afforded excellent views for one and all.



*Patagonia Tyrant* © Paul Prior



*Long-tailed Meadowlark* © Steve Ogle



*Tierra del Fuego, Ushuaia © Steve Ogle*

Backtracking to the trail-head and our picnic lunch we had wonderful looks at a trio of **Magellanic Woodpeckers** - two females and a male.



*Magellanic Woodpecker, Torrest del Paine © Steve Ogle*

We then drove to the trail-head at Glacier Martial, where we embarked on a slow trudge up the off-season ski-slope to the snow-line where Lengua and Nire trees gave way to open habitat and unbeatable looks at **Ochre-naped** and **Dark-faced Ground-tyrants**, and a **Cinclodes** which, after much debate, we decided was **Buff-winged**.



*Group at snowline © Paul Prior*

We about-faced and started the somewhat easier hike back down the stream-side trail and were met by our van to transfer back to our hotel and supper. **Day 6** After breakfast, we strolled along the waterfront past schools of **Dolphin Gulls**, and a very excited **Dark-bellied Cinclodes**, to join the queue to board our Beagle Channel cruise vessel. Winds were extremely light, which did not bode well for any seabird activity although we could see numbers of **Southern Giant Petrels** out in the strait as we left the harbour. We steamed past an island colony of about 1500 **Imperial Cormorants** with **Flightless Steamer-ducks** and **Kelp Geese** on the rocky shoreline, and then beached on the shore of a larger island where we disembarked to hike the short trail to a point that provided a vista back to Ushuaia with a backdrop of the distant Darwin Range and yesterday's Glacier Martial. The same hike produced our first **Austral Negritos**, great looks at **Chilean Skuas** and a **Blackish Oystercatcher**. Back on board we continued to steam east along the channel to a series of islands in the vicinity of Les Eclaireurs lighthouse. As we manoeuvred along the shoreline of these islands where **Southern Sea-lions** lounged, two island inhabitants joined us on deck: several **Snowy Sheathbills**, and then a pair of **Blackish Cinclodes**, apparently in the hopes of novel food items or freshwater from the boat's windscreen washers. By now the breeze had picked up very slightly, but only just enough to inspire a handful of **Black-browed Albatrosses** to flap slowly over the still rather calm waters. The vessel turned for shore past a large gathering of **Giant Petrels** and we disembarked for lunch. In the early afternoon, we headed back to the port to board our bus for the hour's drive to Haberton Ranch where we waited our turn (entertained by a brief cultural tour of the ranch) to boat out to the Isla Martilla.



*Museo Acatushún, Haberton Ranch © Steve Ogle*

As soon as we hit the shore we were greeted by wonderful looks at the small colony of **Gentoo Penguins** and there standing tall amongst the Gentoos were two **King Penguins**, one undergoing a rather untidy molt, but the other in pristine plumage.



*King Penguins with Gentoos © Paul Prior*



*King Penguin © Steve Ogle*

A third penguin species, the now familiar **Magellanic Penguin**, was present in good numbers occupying their burrows further along the trail. Back at Haberton Ranch we were treated to an extremely informative presentation in the local museum, full of sea mammal skeletons, salvaged from beaches along the channel. **Day 7** We were picked up by our new driver to head north out of the city, stopping briefly on the edge of town to scan the hundreds of **Kelp Gulls** and assorted **Caracaras (Crested, Chimango, and White-throated)** scavenging at the city dump - no birding expedition would be complete without a visit to the local dump. And then out to Garibaldi Pass where rain (almost the only such weather of the entire trip) stopped play. We then settled in for the long drive across Tierra del Fuego to the city of Rio Grande. As we approached the city we made a brief visit to Laguna Patos where a **Magellanic Oystercatcher** looked out for her chicks while **Chiloe Wigeon, Crested Ducks, Yellow-billed Pintail** and **Chilean Flamingos** fed and roosted. Before heading to our hotel we visited the shorebird research center but the tide was low and birds were feeding far out on the extensive mudflats. Telescopes were barely sufficient to pick out distant **Hudsonian Godwits** and masses of **White-rumped Sandpipers**, but **Snowy Sheathbills** and **Magellanic Oystercatchers** fed closer in and a slick of Giant Petrels sat on the distant beach. In the afternoon a few of us scanned the mudflats in front of the hotel as the tide rapidly rose, managing distant views of a flock of 204 **Hudsonian Godwits** and 34 **Red Knot** together with hundreds of **White-rumped Sandpipers**. Then in the evening we met with a couple of the local shorebird researchers who took us to the habitual high tide roosting locations. The various species that had been foraging on the exposed flats had arranged themselves into discrete roost flocks along the beach. First we encountered about 120 **Whimbrel**, then 90 **Magellanic Oystercatchers**, and then a large flock of 140 **Crested Ducks**, but for some reason the Knot and the Godwits weren't at the usual preferred locations.



*Crested Ducks taking flight © Paul Prior*

**Day 8** We were met again by one of the shorebird researchers, who was to lead us to an inland estancia where we hoped a couple of goodies awaited us. We drove to the Laguna Miranda, which did not look too promising since it was almost completely dried up. Nevertheless, we walked the shoreline in the hopes of locating one of our target birds, and after about 20 minutes, the front runners accidentally flushed a bird which flew a short distance out onto the salt pan: **Magellanic Plover!** The bird flew again and busied itself back in the area where we'd first flushed it. In due course the bird settled down onto a clutch of four eggs. We beat a cautious retreat all having had excellent looks at this star bird.



*Magellanic Plover © Paul Prior*

Back on the ranch road we were treated to great looks at both **Short-billed** and **Common Miners**, and very protective **Two-banded Plover** parents attempting to distract us from their tiny chicks. It was now only a very short drive to find our second target bird, a pair of **Ruddy-headed Geese** strolling in a roadside field not far from a mixed flock of **Upland** and **Ashy-headed Geese**. An extremely productive morning, but now we were going to have to attend to the usual shenanigans of crossing an international border. Always a long and tedious ritual, this one at least included an entertaining training session for the lone sniffer dog as we waited to head into Chile. But the birding surprises were not done for the day. We continued north towards Cerro Tombo, and then took a sharp left off the highway to a site that was supposed to be closed for the day. Fortunately, the staff had been kind enough to meet us on their day-off and we were treated to a private tour of the Pinguino Rey reserve, the only mainland **King Penguin** colony in the world. With 96 birds currently in residence, the reserve doesn't compare to the massive offshore colonies in the south Atlantic, but still a wonderful experience.



*King Penguins © Paul Prior*

**Day 9** We were allowed a late start today since our ferry across the Straits of Magellan was not leaving till mid a.m. Upon boarding we made straight for the top deck and began scanning for **Commerson's Dolphins**. It wasn't long until their distinctive black and white forms were seen way out in the Straits.



*Commerson's Dolphins, Magellanic Strait © Steve Ogle*

We also managed to spot a lone **Leopard Seal** and a huge flock of about 1500 **Hudsonian Godwits** (albeit extremely distant) moving en masse from their roost on the north side of the channel, south to the rich feeding in Bahia Lomas. One of our group was lucky enough to spot a single **Magellanic Diving-petrel** close to the port-side, and then, as we passed the half-way point, a few of the dolphins came a little closer, allowing us much better looks. From Punta Delgada on the north side of the channel we drove east along a rough road which took us close to several small wetlands where we were treated to excellent looks at various ducks, a few **Magellanic Snipe**, and at last a tight roosting flock of about 130 **Hudsonian Godwits**.



*Hudsonian Godwits © Paul Prior*

We continued along the same road and rejoined the main road to Pali Aike but unfortunately we had been informed the previous night that all National Park staff in Chile were currently on strike, and we would not be able to enter the park. Making the most of the situation we strode out across the landscape outside the park gates, a flat extensive steppe where we still managed to encounter **Tawny-throated Dotterel**, **Least Seedsnipe** and **Common Miners**.



*Least Seedsnipe © Paul Prior*

Having failed to persuade a passing park ranger to let us into the park we now had enough time on our hands to drive an alternate route that we had never previously tried. Almost straight away this rerouting paid off for us when Steve spotted a **Chocolate-vented Tyrant** along the fence line. On this rarely driven road (I don't recall passing any other vehicles for the entire 100 km distance!) the sheep and **Guanacos** were more skittish than usual which created serious difficulties for our driver. But being the only vehicle meant that there were many roadside birds. Our first wetland stop presented us with several **Rufous-chested Dotterel** and excellent looks at **Cordilleran Canastero**. Shortly afterwards we happened upon a pair of birds that had not even been on our radar: **White-bridled Finches**; subsequently we encountered seven more of this handsome species. Strangest of all though was the nearly totally white (leucistic) **Tawny-throated Dotterel**, very conspicuous against the dingy brown and grey steppe. Finally, as we neared the end of this long detour, someone in the van shouted "armadillo" and sure enough, close to the starboard side of the van was surely one of everybody's favourites, a **Big Hairy Armadillo**!



*Big Hairy Armadillo © Paul Prior*

**Day 10** After last night's late arrival in Puerto Natales it was decided to take a free morning to explore the town and the waterfront before departing for Torres del Paine at 11 am. The drive took us past tall cliffs where **Andean Condors** drifted far overhead, and then we called in at The Ovejero (our hotel for the next three days) for lunch and to ditch the trailer. By 2:30 pm we were back on the road making our way towards the distant triple spires of Torres del Paine. Despite the ongoing strike we would not be prevented from driving the park roads and our intention was to try our luck searching for Pumas. At the first look out where we gazed over at the famous peaks, a local guide informed us that a Puma had been sighted a short drive along the main loop. As we reached the location, one of our group spotted the female walking through the short scrub on the far side of the valley and so we set up scopes in the hopes of some better looks. But it was still rather early and both she and her two grown cubs were more interested in snoozing, patiently ignoring the annoyingly persistent alarm calls from the **Guanaco** sentries posted on the highest points. It was an excellent start so we decided to continue along the loop in the hopes of more of the same. We certainly didn't expect to end the evening with **nine Pumas sighted!** And most of the animals were outside of the park boundary.



*Young Puma © Paul Prior*

On the way to this massive Puma count we stopped in at Juncillo Marsh where we failed to find any rails, but watched a pair of **Cinereous Harriers**, a **Short-eared Owl**, and our first **Silvery Grebe**. We also managed excellent looks at yet another Furnariid species, the **Scale-throated Earthcreeper**, carrying food to a nearby nest. **Day 11** The ongoing strike was expected to impact today's plans somewhat, but in fact, in the end we did extremely well for birds. We drove the road along Bote Valley towards Glacier Grey, stopping for **Fire-eyed Diucon** and a tranquil pair of **Spectacled Duck**. Some roadside pygmy-owl impersonating brought us a crowd of **White-crested Elaenias** together with **Thorn-tailed Rayaditos**, **Patagonian Sierra-finches**, **Black-chinned Siskins** and a lone **Tufted Tit-tyrant**. As we piled off the bus at the Rio Pingo restaurant car park, we were met by a **Rufous-tailed Plantcutter** croaking out his strange little song, and a pair of **White-browed Ground-tyrants**. After lunch, having inspected the unmanned picket line on the suspension bridge entrance, we turned back and walked the riparian forest to the Hotel Lago Grey. From here we were able to get a pretty good look at the distant glacier together with a couple of small, blue "calves"



*Glacier Grey*

Meanwhile, the hotel grounds held **Magellanic Woodpecker**, **Austral Parakeets** and **Chilean Flicker**.



*Austral Parakeet © Paul Prior*

**Day 12** Today was going to be a long one in the company of our two “puma-guides”. This called for a very early start and so, equipped with bagged breakfasts, we followed Miguel and Raphael out into the Park, following pretty much the same route that we’d followed on our first visit. After a couple of hours we spotted the same recently pregnant female **Puma** that we’d encountered a couple of days

previously. This time she was lounging on a hillside in the dawn sun and as we stopped she strolled behind the van and into a nearby shrubby gulley from where we could hear the scratchy mewling of her very young cubs. She was otherwise engaged and so we decided to try our luck elsewhere. We headed out on a short hike past the Juncillo Marsh. The **Short-eared Owl** was present again but we also managed to find a pair of **Spectacled Tyrants** and a **Cinnamon-bellied Ground-tyrant**. We returned to the van and continued driving a slow circuit. Spring was definitely in the air, and the weather was glorious. We spent many minutes watching a very calm group of **Guanacos** drinking at a roadside pool and were delighted to see a mother bring what Raphael informed us was the first young of the year down to the shoreline.



*Guanaco mother and baby © Paul Prior*

We drove slowly back to The Ovejero for lunch and a break, the intention being to join Miguel and Raphael for another try in the afternoon. After an hour of slowly driving the park circuit it became somewhat clear that we were not going to have quite as much luck as on our first day and so it was decided to take to foot and to hike a 3.5 km trail across the open hills in full view of the glorious peaks - towering into still blue skies. I think that for several in the group this was perhaps the highlight of our entire trip, despite the relative lack of birds and the absence of additional Pumas; we were out in the landscape, the weather was perfect, the landscape pristine and the austral spring was very much in the air.



*Hiking Torrest del Paine © Paul Prior*

Jonathan was waiting to pick us up in the van at the end of the hike and we continued our slow search for Pumas. We found one more which for a while looked like she might be the one to create some real action as she slowly moved along the nearby hillside towards a group of Guanacos, but the latter were very much aware of her presence (although it seemed that at one stage the cat had a Guanaco within 50 metres either side of her). Rain had been forecast for the following day and cloud was beginning to partially obscure the three towers. We called it a day and said our farewells to our two “puma-guides” - them’s the breaks, Nature is not on tap not even for the local experts, and we had been supremely lucky on our first day’s outing.



*Torres del Paine © Paul Prior*

**Day 13** Our last day in this spectacular landscape and the forecast rainy weather was still holding off. We set off from our hotel and almost immediately happened upon a rather early **Andean Condor** - a superb adult - circling low over the roadside steppe.



*Andean Condor © Paul Prior*

Our plan now was to head back into the Park to visit the Cascada Paine in search of Torrent Ducks but had no luck and therefore had plenty of time to make for the far side of the main circuit to Laguna Azul. En route we stopped at Lago Armarga to at last get some decent looks at **Chilean Flamingos** (we'd passed these same birds perhaps four times over the past couple of days). **Mourning Sierra-finches** were displaying on the hillside by the laguna and a quick, hopeful broadcast of song brought in our fourth and final **Canastero: Austral!**



*Chilean Flamingos © Paul Prior*

Laguna Azul provided the photographers among us with yet more incredible photographic opportunities, the still unobscured three spires reflected in the almost mirror calm lagoon. A very approachable pair of **Spectacled Ducks** kept the birders happy while a **Southern Four-eyed Toad** clambered out of the ice-cold lake to provide herpetofauna species number four for the safari! After partaking of one more lunch at The Ovejero we packed the trailer and headed west, away from the Torres del Paine. As the weather finally began to close-in somewhat we came across a trio of grounded **Andean Condors** - an adult and two juveniles - attending the wake of a nearby dead cow. Other Condors stayed aloft along the crest of the towering cliffs to the south of the road. With the Mylodon Caves closed due to the strike we made a detour to visit the little waterfall near Laguna Sofia which also afforded us the chance to hike a short loop trail in search of any missing bird species. **White-crested Elaenias** and **Thorn-tailed Rayaditos** were as responsive as ever to our pygmy-owl whistles and provided great looks. As we finished the loop, several of our group managed just one last lifer for the trip: a **Striped Woodpecker** flew into a nearby tree and showed off for a couple of minutes. And so, we returned to Puerto Natales, a new hotel, and the final supper of the trip. Officially the trip would end after breakfast on the following day but this seemed a good opportunity to canvas the entire group for bird of the trip. "Bird of the trip" does not necessarily equate with "trip highlight" but it would surely be an easier selection. The Torres, the unbelievably gorgeous weather, the "nine-puma" count, the Guanacos ... would all surely be front runners. But even reducing the field to "bird of the trip" it was still difficult to select from the varied array of avian encounters. The Condors were still fresh in our minds, but the King Penguins were hard to beat. But really the highlight is Patagonia itself. Just being here, at "the end of the world", is thrill enough.



*Lago Azul and Torres del Paine with reflection © Paul Prior*



*Hiking Juncillos trail © Steve Ogle*



*Lago Sarmiento © Steve Ogle*



*Salto Rio Paine © Steve Ogle*



*Group at the Isla Martillo Gentoo penguin colony*

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