



Patagonia Wildlife Safari Trip Report Nov 2023

[Link: Patagonia Wildlife Safari Trip Report Nov 2023](#)

By Steve Ogle and Paul Prior The 2023 version of our Patagonia Wildlife Safari was a contender for our best tour of Southern Argentina and Chile to date! Guides Paul Prior and Steve Ogle enjoyed a fun-loving group and plenty of wildlife sightings, which presented themselves at the perfect moments. We'd like to thank everyone for their participation and enthusiasm. Below is a write-up by Steve for the Argentina side, followed by Paul for the Chile side of the adventure. **THE ARGENTINE PORTION Day 1:** Our initial meet-up followed by an afternoon foray to the downtown core of Buenos Aires was wrought with weather that only a duck could love. That being said, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, and most of the group headed down to the Costanera Sur ecological reserve to look at ducks. The rain was coming down in sheets and it was far below the seasonal temperature, but we were keen. Geared up and resolute though we were, we actually only tallied two species of duck (**Rosy-billed Pochard** and **Lake Duck**) but had great looks through the rain at three species of coot (**White-winged, Red-fronted** and **Red-gartered**), **Wattled Jacana, Limpkin, Common Gallinule, Cocoi Heron**, among other water birds. On the damp walk back to the hotel we encountered a few land birds: **Green-barred Woodpecker, Rufous Hornero, Rufous-bellied Thrush, Chalk-browed Mockingbird** and **Nanday Parakeet**. In the evening we dried off at a restaurant nearby the hotel, which featured all the tasty dishes and refreshments we anticipated in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, all manner of hotel room tricks were implemented to dry out equipment and clothing in preparation for the morning!



Buenos Aires rain © Steve Ogle

Day 2: The first part of our tour is always contingent on the timing of our flight down to Trelew. This morning we departed at a reasonable mid-morning time, but the intensely occupied airport line-up (by travelers, not by staff!) did cause a slight amount of trepidation. It was evident that chaos rules in this small airport and it is a miracle that planes come and go. We all did walk onto the jetway with time to spare and were soon enough on our way down to Peninsula Valdes. We had a stop in Bahia Blanca en route where we got off the plane, had lunch and saw a few new birds (**Southern Martin**, **Spot-winged Pigeon**, etc). Once we arrived in Trelew we were greeted by Carina, our local guide, and we loaded up and proceeded to the Ornithological Lagoon, which is one of the glossy names for what is essentially a dammed lake adjacent to the town dump. The most prolific and apparent birds on site were the several hundred **Chilean Flamingoes** standing tall in the shallows. A rare **White-cheeked Pintail** was sighted on shore, along with some **Black-headed Ducks** and many other waterbirds. Our first migrants were encountered in the form of **White-rumped Sandpipers** and a **Lesser Yellowlegs**. We caught fleeting glimpses of a female **Spectacled Tyrant** but did not find the gawdy male. Departing here we drove for over an hour to the entrance to the Peninsula Valdes reserve and checked out their museum features (and bathrooms) before continuing to our hotel right on the bay of Puerto Piramides.



Ornithological Lagoon © Steve Ogle

Day 3: This was our first real day of action! We started with a hearty breakfast of salami and cheese, not knowing this would be a repeated menu for the next two weeks. At the whale-watching office across the street we were fitted with life jackets and spray ponchos (a-la *Maid-of-the-Mist*), and we were soon on the boat heading out into decidedly choppy seas. Thankfully we didn't have to go far to see whales; in fact, most of us started watching them from the hotel lobby during breakfast. Now we had better views, and by this, I mean point blank looks at baby and mom **Southern Right Whale** frolicking beside the boat!



Southern Right Whale © Steve Ogle

After our fill of close whale encounters we headed to the “Restingas,” or shelves, which not only was the name of our hotel, but also a geologic feature with all sorts of interesting marine life. This included the pigeon-like **Snowy Sheathbills**, **Imperial**, **Neotropic** and **Magellanic Cormorants**, **Blackish** and **American Oystercatchers**, **South American Sea Lions**, and others.



Peninsula Valdes birding © Steve Ogle

Back on shore, we were ready to head out to Caleta Valdes, which, according to the brochure, is a place to look for orcas. We normally speak encouragingly to the group, however, in truth we have never had any luck in the past. Two species that we do traditionally run into are **Patagonian Mara** and **Southern Elephant Seal**, which provided excellent views, although honestly these aren't the most energetic subjects. We also saw **Lesser Rhea**, **Burrowing Owl**, **Big Hairy Armadillo**, **Southern Cavy**, **Southern** and **Northern Giant-Petrels** and **South American Terns**. The star of the show, and the brochure, that had Paul and Steve pinching themselves, was a procession of no less than a dozen **Orcas**, in two pods, that came in from the south and passed right in front of the Caleta Valdes viewing deck! These magnificent hunters even took a page out of the Nat Geo script and played around with a juvenile **Neotropic Cormorant** for half an hour—tugging it under water, then letting it resurface— before releasing it back to the waves. In the parking lot, as we reluctantly departed, we saw a good-sized **tarantula** (species unknown), leaving a creepy impression on Steve, but it was still not enough to overtake the elation of the orca sightings. All of this excitement took place on what was our warmest day of the entire tour: hovering in the high 20's out on the peninsula. All in all it was a great day, capped off by a wonderful dinner at “Bar La Estacion!”



Orcas practicing © Steve Ogle



Puerto Piramides dinner © Steve Ogle

Day 4: Today we endeavoured to make our way back to Trelew, stopping en route to search for birds of the Argentine shrub-steppe. This began with a viewpoint above the restingas followed by a short walk to call in a skittish **Scale-throated Earthcreeper**. At the Doradillo reserve beaches we saw our last whale of the trip and our first of several new bird species: **Grassland Yellow-Finch**, **Sharp-billed Canastero**, and a surprise (to Paul and Steve) **White-crested Elaenia**, which is a

forest bird but on migration can be found in the open scrub. Further along the road we started coming up short on new birds despite considerable effort, but eventually we managed to get great looks at the charismatic **White-throated Cacholote** at its wildly-constructed oven-like nest composed of thorny twigs. Incidentally, "cachalote" is the Spanish name for Sperm Whale but note it is spelled differently and normally found in a different habitat. One interesting land sighting was of a *Culebrid* snake spotted by someone in the back of the van as we were out looking for more birds. This one went by the English name of **Mousehole Snake**. On the continued avian quest, we did finally get good looks at a lovely austral migrant: **Fork-tailed Flycatcher**. Then we stopped in Puerto Madryn at a known roosting location for the gawdy **Burrowing Parakeet**, getting good looks at some of them as they landed on overhead wires! Finally, we stopped to view the giant *Argentinasaurus* model to the north of Trelew.



Piramides Lookout © Steve Ogle



White-throated Cacholote © Steve Ogle



Mouse Hole Snake © Steve Ogle



Burrowing Parakeets © Steve Ogle



Argentinasaurus Tail © Steve Ogle

Day 5: This day was for the most part a travel day, as we had a very early flight to Ushuaia, but one that for the first time took us back to Buenos Aires in the process. Once we eventually arrived in Ushuaia (the only Argentine city on the western side of the Andes) the entire group was feeling energetic enough for the march up the old ski hill above the city. Once again, we were battered by rain, which did nothing to help us find many birds—although we did encounter **Patagonian Sierra-**

Finch, Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant, and a flyover **White-throated Caracara.** The area is known as Glacier Martial for the namesake glacier high on the ridge, which was covered by a deep blanket of spring snow. We were getting the idea that it was a late spring, and would soon be reminded it was an El Niño year.



Glacier Martial snow hike © Steve Ogle

Day 6: Today we had two boat tours, the first starting with a bus commute out toward Haberton Ranch and Martillo Island. The ranch was closed on Tuesdays, so in classic Argentine tourism form, the bus driver allowed us a bathroom break at what was formerly a pristine scenic viewpoint. The lack of public bathrooms had us wondering where all the tourism dollars went, which were brought in from the hordes of Antarctic cruise ship guests, most of whom took excursions such as the one we were on. Regardless, we took the boat out to the island and enjoyed a delightful hour with the penguins, on a well-managed private island. First, the **Gentoos** tried to steal the show with antics that included waddling over to an adjacent nest and stealing one form of adornment or another (bark or rocks). After this show, we walked among nesting **Magellanic Penguins**, who stared up at us curiously from dozens of burrows. We had good looks at **Austral Negrito, Flightless Steamer Duck** and nesting Chilean Skuas.



Gentoo Penguin thief © Steve Ogle



Magellanic Penguins © Steve Ogle

The afternoon involved a shorter boat excursion to the iconic lighthouse out in the Beagle Channel, with stops at some sea lion and cormorant rookeries. We were on the look-out for birds and had great success spotting **Black-browed Albatross**, **Southern Fulmar**, **Kelp Goose**, and the inquisitive **Blackish Cinclodes**. We had good looks at a **Southern Giant Petrel** eating a freshly-killed **Imperial Cormorant**, complete with splattering blood and gore. On our return, we enjoyed a

no-less picturesque sunset, although the sun truly did not go down until after 10pm—at which point we were just settling up after dinner. By now we were accustomed to the late meals here in Argentina!



Giant Petrel gore © Steve Ogle



Beagle Channel © Steve Ogle

Day 7: Today was the beginning of a series of logistically-challenging segments, albeit ones we have

slowly honed in over the years. We have a lot of ground to cover between Ushuaia to cross the entirety of Tierra del Fuego all the way up to the Chilean mainland. First thing in the morning, we spent several hours on a birding walk Tierra del Fuego National Park, with cold temperatures and wind keeping the birds tucked away. This area is just to the west of Ushuaia. At our first stop, an obliging **Great Grebe** came in for great photos. The highlight of the morning surely was the male **Magellanic Woodpecker** that was tapping on the window of an abandoned cabin. It's amazing what a red crest can do to everyone's spirits on an otherwise quiet and chilly walk through the woods. Some of us did get on a curious **Chilean Fox** that was hovering around the park visitor's centre, and we did get good views of a **White-throated Treerunner** amid the more common **Thorn-tailed Rayaditos**.



Great Grebe © Steve Ogle



Magellanic Woodpecker © Steve Ogle

Soon enough, we were departing for Rio Grande, but not without our first meal of take-out empanadas, which kept us fueled up on the sinuous drive up and over Paso Garibaldi. We were back on the eastern side of the Andes and soon enough back out into the steppe. In the afternoon we arrived in Rio Grande with enough time to visit the charming interpretation centre of the Atlantic Coastal Reserve. This stretch of shoreline aims to protect wintering shorebirds—mainly Red Knot and Hudsonian Godwit. A short walk to the beach rewarded us with stunning looks at no less than 1,100 Hudsonian Godwits, and several Red Knots. These tallies come from Paul's later efforts to scan through photos of the flock, combined with affirmations from our local guide, Agustin. An obliging **South American Gray Fox** came in quite close while searching through the beach detritus. In the evening we relaxed at our quaint hotel, Posada de los Sauces (willow trees) where we enjoyed our last Argentine meal for the tour.



Hudsonian Godwit flock © Steve Ogle

Day 8: A casual departure had us feeling refreshed, and we eagerly approached Estancia Los Flamencos, just outside of Rio Grande, to search for Ruddy-headed Goose and Magellanic Plover. Both of these species are notoriously difficult to find, and this farm was our best bet. Alas, the Patagonian winds were doing their best to thwart our efforts and it was nearly impossible to scan for plovers out on their preferred habitat of windswept shoreline while facing into 60kph gusts. We did manage to spot flocks of Baird's Sandpipers, several Two-banded Plovers but alas, no Magellanics. The Ruddy-headed Goose was a bit easier to see, and we left with a total of six of these range-restricted breeders for our lists. From the estancia, we headed north toward the border crossing of San Sebastien after a quick rest stop at the YPF gas station.



THE CHILEAN PORTION Day 8, continued: Having made comparatively short work of the border crossing (despite various Wi-Fi issues) we met our new “chofer”, Jonathan, and were quickly on our way to the next wildlife highlight: the **King Penguins** of Pinguino Rey located on the shore of Bahia Inutil (Useless Bay!). These 90 pairs constitute the only mainland colony of King Penguins in South America. Always such a pleasure to watch these characters go about their business, and of course, we then had a dose of retail therapy in the reserve’s gift shop, supporting the excellent conservation work. From here it was a short drive to our overnight in Cerro Sombrero.



King Penguins © Paul Prior

Day 9: A leisurely breakfast and departure had us in place in the queue for the first northbound ferry across the Strait of Magellan. This is a short crossing and so it was all hands on deck to scan for two particular species. The first, Magellanic Diving Petrel, is a difficult one to pin down, usually their flights are brief and then they disappear in the chop and swell of the ocean. Fortunately, the second species, **Commerson’s Dolphin**, proved much more cooperative, approaching the ferry, and briefly swimming alongside. After a caffeine refill in Punta Delgada we continued on our way, stopping for excellent looks at **Magellanic Snipe**, **Magellanic Oystercatcher** and **Flying Steamer Ducks** along the Y-535. En route to the Pali Aike National Park entrance we were lucky enough to come across roadside **White-bridled Finch** and our only **Least Seedsnipe**, the latter treating us to a wonderful display flight. Once in the park, we made for our picnic spot, and then hiked the crater, soaking up the wonderful ambiance of the place, marvelling at the diversity of lichen along the crater walls and encountering, **Sarmiento Lizard**, **Cordilleran Canastero**, **Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle**, and **Scale-throated Earthcreeper**. Sadly, the late spring that we were experiencing meant that none of the early orchids were on show.



Our group in crater © Paul Prior



Sarmiento Lizard © Paul Prior



Pali Aike crater wall © Paul Prior

The drive to Puerto Natales was going to be a long one, but Steve compensated by spotting a pair of Chocolate-vented Tyrants as we embarked on the journey.



Chocolate-vented Tyrant © Paul Prior

Day 10: A late start today presented the group with the opportunity to explore Puerto Natales and the waterfront and then by late morning we were en route to Torres del Paine. Our road, Highway 9, took us past cliffs where we were afforded good looks at **Andean Condors** sailing along the ridge - upwards of 50 birds in total! We continued to the park, entering via the Guarderia Laguna Amarga

and making straight for the Canedon Machos. Here we were in the middle of broadcasting for Spot-billed Ground-Tyrant when **Guanaco** sentinels on the nearby hilltops started fussing and alarming - seconds later Steve spotted the cause. A female **Puma** making its way slowly across the hillside. She turned and then made straight for our van, crossing the road 20 metres from our position. Incredible!



Puma © Paul Prior

After such an amazing start the rest of the day might have seemed rather anticlimactic but the weather was near perfect and presented superb views of the peaks to the north. Birdwise we managed yet another **White-throated Caracara** and the forementioned (and quickly forgotten) **Spot-billed Ground-tyrant** among other species. Finally, we arrived at Hosteria Pehoe, our home for the next three nights. We had not stayed at this hotel since 2018, and although not the most upmarket of accommodations and dining, the view from the hotel is simply spectacular! The grounds held nesting **Upland Geese**, **Thorn-tailed Rayadito**, **Black-chinned Siskin**, and even a noisy, nest-building pair of **Crested Caracaras**.



Crested Caracara © Paul Prior

Day 11: After breakfast - taking in the forementioned view - Jonathan drove us out of the park and over to Lago Gray and Rio Pingo. Here, after ascertaining that the forest trail was pretty much birdless, a few hardy souls opted to trek out across the beach to get up close and personal with the blue iceberg sitting offshore, downstream from Glacier Grey. Back at Rio Pingo, we took a side trail for views of **Patagonian Sierra-Finch** and **Fire-eyed Diucon**, but failed to raise a peep from the local tapaculo.



Fire-eyed Diucon © Paul Prior

Loitering outside the restaurant, however, was our first Rufous-tailed Plantcutter, rasping out its strange, croaking song. After lunch, a walk along the riparian forest trail to the nearby hotel held little of interest birdwise other than **Austral Blackbird**, but did present us with a couple of Patagonian insects, including South America's only native *Bombus*: **Giant Bumblebee** (or, in Chile, Moscardon), a species buzzing closer and closer to extinction (listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List), due to the misguided introduction (yet again!) of the European **Buff-tailed Bumblebee**, which we also encountered on our walk. Perhaps not quite as impressive as a puma, but it still counts as "Patagonian wildlife" in my book.



Giant Bumblebee © Paul Prior

We headed on back to Lago Pehoe, bypassing the hotel to drop by Salto Grande - the Falls between Lagos Nordenskjold and Pehoe. Sadly, no Torrent Ducks, but one of our number discovered a pair of **Spectacled Ducks** with a healthy and well-grown brood of five ducklings in an adjacent pond (a reminder that it is spring hereabouts!). **Day 12:** A big day today! This was to be our official puma-day, complete with local puma-guide. Of course, the pressure was off considering the excellent encounter of two days prior, but one always hopes for a little more. We were up very early to make our rendezvous with the guide and then spent the morning tailing him as he drove the network of roads from Amarga to Laguna Juncas, from Lago Azul to Canedon Machos. At Laguna Juncas we paused the puma-search and attempted to get looks at the local rails. Steve's broadcast elicited a vocal response from **Austral Rail**, but the bird remained invisible, deep in the wetland vegetation. Scanning other various wetlands eventually brought us looks at another family of Spectacled Ducks but try as we might - paying particular attention to the sentinel **Guanacos** posted on the ridges, we were out of luck in the puma-department. Then finally at mid-morning we happened upon a huddle of vehicles parked overlooking Lago Sarmiento where, sure enough, we watched as a pregnant female Puma slowly padded along the shoreline. Certainly not a patch on our original encounter, but every sighting of a big cat is a thrill! We headed back to Pehoe and broke for a few hours around lunch, making do in the early afternoon with further views of **Thorn-tailed Rayadito** and such on the hotel island.



Thorn-tailed Rayadito © Paul Prior

Then at 4 pm we were on the road again, reconvening with our puma-guide for a continuation of the search. There was somewhat more activity now, and we were distracted with excellent looks at roadside **Rufous-tailed Plantcutters**, **Austral Parakeets**, and **Cordilleran Canasteros**. Then, again, we came across a puma-stakeout: a couple of vehicles waiting into the evening for a Puma to emerge from a known location in the adjacent valley. We waited with them for half an hour, but then given the long day, and the fact that we'd had a couple of encounters already the group opted to head back to the Hosteria Pehoe for supper.



Austral Parakeet © Paul Prior

Day 13: A leisurely breakfast saw us on the road at a more reasonable hour this morning, and we left the Torres behind us as we drove into unseasonal snow flurries (thanks, El Niño!) en route to the Miledon Cave. Fortunately, the snowfall eased-off just as we pulled into the carpark, and we were able to take a pleasant stroll to the famous cave. The life-size statue of a Giant Ground Sloth (i.e., the Miledon) was to be our non-avian encounter for the day, but it did seem somewhat apt, given our recent meeting with Titanosaurio the week before in Argentina. All part of the Safari! Birdwise the break in the snow, encouraged a couple of larger raptors to appear overhead: first a young **Andean Condor** sailed down to perch on the cliff above the cave, and then a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle soared in tight circles overhead as we walked back to the visitor center.



Andean Condor © Paul Prior

The long drive south to Punta Arenas was broken by an excellent lunch in Puerto Natales, the odd restroom break and a rather ambitious scan for the missing Magellanic Plover at a roadside saltlake. The best birding, for the day, surprisingly, was at an urban wetland on the outskirts of Punta Arenas. Here, as we scanned through the dozens of **Red Shovelers** and **Chilean Flamingos**, we were delighted to find a flock of 37 **Wilson's Phalaropes** swimming and spinning alongside the larger foraging waterfowl. A timely reminder, for those of us only familiar with this species from their northern nesting and migration staging points, that we were ourselves about to embark on our long flights north. The snow on this last day had been a bit of a shock but was at least a taste of the temperatures that awaited us as we left this austral spring behind. Overall, the weather had been pretty kind, book-ended by the grotty rain in Buenos Aires and the chilly flurries (pun intended) here in Magallanes Region. Conditions had afforded us many wonderful wildlife encounters from Giant Bumblebee to Southern Right Whales, mammals (both marine and terrestrial), reptiles, and plenty of birds, flightless and otherwise. Thanks to everyone for making this yet another unforgettable and wonderful fortnight in this remarkable corner of the world.



View from Pehoe © Paul Prior



Our group in Puerto Natales