

Trip report on visit to Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, January 2011

The following is my journal from the trip and probably has more detail than you may care for. The short mammal summary of the trip is this: 11 Chillas (Grey Foxes), 5 Chingues (Patagonian Skunks), 30 European Hares, 500+ Guanacos, and 3 Pumas (2 eyes only with a spotlight). Pictures are at the bottom.

I first contacted Jose Sandoval, a park ranger and guide at Torres del Paine, back in September on the recommendation of Jon Hall. He responded to my initial inquiry, though it was in Spanish, but then never responded again. I was starting to worry a couple of weeks ago after 4 unanswered emails and a failed phone call (I did manage to learn that he was stuck in Puerto Natales due to the strike over increased gas prices which shut down Southern Chile). So in desperation I called in back-ups, my brother Brad who speaks Spanish. I had him translate an email for me to which Jose immediately responded. After several more interchanges in Spanish I now have a guide for two days of puma searching! That probably increases my odds of success by about 1,000%.

The best word I can think of to describe the wind in Patagonia is relentless. If I had to create a scale for how hard the wind is blowing down here it would go something like this. Not blowing—this never really happens so you must not be here. Can't feel it—a rare occurrence that can happen inside (this isn't a safe bet as sometimes it blows hard enough you can feel the house move and the windows aren't exactly airtight to begin with) or in the perfect place outside, perhaps in a depression or cave. Normal—a typically windy day for most of the world. Eyes are watering—a condition brought about by strong winds that happens often to those looking for pumas in Patagonia. Hold on to your hat, or better yet take it off—at this level remove your hat or risk losing it. Couldn't pass a "walk the line test"—causes people to weave as they are blown off course. Can't hold still—strong enough that you go where the wind takes you, you are not in control. I guess when you are desperate to see pumas and don't you can write an entire paragraph about the wind.

The trip details—I flew Wednesday morning from Boise to San Francisco (where even the airport food is deliciously tempting) to Los Angeles (where it is hard to find anything to eat period in the international terminal) to Santiago (where we sat on the tarmac for 35 minutes at 6AM, waited in a very long line for immigration, had my beef jerky and dried mangos confiscated at customs—no time to negotiate, waited in another long line to recheck my bag,) to Punta Arenas which is just about at the tip of South America. I rented a 4x4 truck which probably wasn't required, but it was nice to have on the uneven dirt roads in the park. A lengthy dirt road led from route 9, the main thoroughfare, to Seno Otway where there is a colony of Magellanic Penguins in residence from October through March. On the way in I saw my first Rheas, a small cousin to the Ostrich. They look quite similar, just smaller and the males color differentiation is much less distinctive. There is about a 1 mile walk-way built through the colony with a viewing blind at the beach where there was a group of about 30 penguins. I saw

about 10 others in burrows or relaxing along the loop. The drive to Puerto Natales was not 4 hours as advertised and I didn't mind, it took about 2.5 hours not counting my detour to Seno Otway. I saw some flamingos and some almost otherworldly trees. The trees seem almost stunted in their growth as I remember the black spruce in the Alaskan arctic and tundra, but they are all deciduous and not as puny. There was evidence of numerous fires over the years. Puerto Natales reminded me of a Chilean version of Valdez, Alaska tucked between the mountains and the sea, though the immediate mountains are less dramatic here. It is a thriving little hamlet in the summer filled with tourists, tourist stores catering to the outdoor needs, small hotels and restaurants. I'm sure it is pretty quiet the rest of the year. I stayed at AquaTerra a hotel run by a cousin of a business colleague. Service was cordial, the rooms were clean, the wireless internet worked, and the shower water was hot, so I'd recommend it.

I enjoyed a relatively peaceful sleep until 6 AM and then was on the road again headed for Torres del Paine National Park. The mix of terrain thus far on the drive has been confusing. There have been areas of dense forest, rocky snow topped mountains, and lots of pampas—relatively barren looking land with scattered grass and low vegetation. In the last 45 minutes before reaching the park the pavement ended and the wildlife began. I saw 3 chillas—Chilean Gray Foxes and 2 chingues (Patagonian Skunks) along the side of the road and stopped to snap photos. When I saw the first guanacos standing near a fence I wasn't sure if they were captive or not. I had seen some clearly domestic llamas of sorts the day before with wide color variation, but the wild guanacos all have similar color patterns. Approaching the park the clouds obscured the peaks directly in front of me and it wasn't until later in the day that I realized what I had been missing. The two primary mountain segments dominate the park vistas whenever the clouds relent even a little. Los Cuernos has the trademark two-tone coloration with the dark almost steel blue tips on the gray bases, while Las Torres has the trademark three independent towers. After paying the entrance fee and getting a park map I turned right and quickly came to the bridge that Jon Hall had written about doing some damage to his vehicle while crossing (I got the rental insurance on my paid in cash rental—seemed like a prudent thing to do so far from home). I folded the mirrors in and had probably 4-6 inches of leeway on either side, enough, but not with much room to spare. I checked into the Refugio Torres Central (a hostel) and was pleasantly surprised by the entrance and eating area. I didn't bother checking the quarters until bed time and found then a set of 3 clean bunk beds. The gal at the front desk spoke good English and said I would have to wait until tomorrow to learn if there were any vacancies for me to add a 3rd night.

I took about 20 minutes to find the trail head past the Las Torres Hotel. There were two volunteers, a young Chilean and American girl reminding hikers to treat the trail with respect. They had plenty of people to remind. My goal, Mirador Las Torres or Base Las Torres—the viewpoint from the base was 9 mostly uphill kilometers away. The first 2.4 kilometers were at a moderate incline so it didn't take me long to shed my layers and leave just my t-shirt. I must be getting old, and I'm certainly out of shape. I was surprised how hard the going was. I realized at

least part of the problem later was my pace. The maps said it was a 4.5 hour hike each way—I did the round trip in 6 hours with 30 minutes at the top. I should follow a pace more consistent with my exercise level because my legs took a beating. I don't ever remember getting cramps while hiking. I had to stop a couple of times on the last stretch up and a number on the way down to avoid going down in a heap with calf and quad (wrong muscle, the one on the front) cramps. A 1.8 km relatively flat stretch took me to a camp ground with a refreshment stand and picnic along a glacial stream. The next 3 km were uphill through mostly wooded areas. Many of the hikers I saw had full backpacks and were camping along the way. The final 1.8km was pretty much straight up the mountain, often a scramble. It nearly brought me to my knees. Just before the final push I caught my first glimpse of the towers—a sight I won't forget and one I needed to climb up the final boulders. It really is a jaw-dropping site when you top the last rise and see the towers in their majesty with the glacial lake below. Even with clouds obscuring the peaks I was astounded. I had seen lots of pictures, but I honestly didn't know which view I was hiking to. I'll take it over Banff and Glacier for sheer aura. Did I mention that the wind was howling? I quickly went from hot to cold in the last ½ km and when I sat down at the top I was shivering and shaking from the cold and my leg muscles. I lasted 30 minutes and would have stayed longer but for the wind. The way back down took an hour less.

I thought I would be tempted to go back to the hostel and take a long nap, but my wanderlust kicked in and I got in the car and retraced my route to the park entrance so I could take the road that leads through the park. I was scheduled to meet Jose at the Pudeto Guard Station at 4:30 the next morning and I didn't know how long it would take me to get there. I didn't want to be late and I didn't want to miss out on any sleep either. The first section is pretty steep but begins to give you an appreciation for the Paine Massif looming across the river. The guanacos on the East side of the park are thick. The eco-zones are somewhat reminiscent of Glacier in that the vegetation is dramatically different. In this case the West is much more forested while the East is more traditional Pampas. I assume the guanacos like the Pampas both for the abundant feed it offers and for the visibility it provides them of their perpetual nemesis the puma. There are pumas throughout the park, but not surprisingly they are concentrated where the guanacos are and the odds of finding one in the forested West probably aren't that much better than back home in Idaho. I found the Pudeto Station after about 50 minutes driving past scattered lakes on both sides of the road and up and down hills under the constant watch of the Massif. Los Cuernos is the more Westerly side of the Massif and obscures the Towers from most of the park. I would learn tomorrow that Jose lives with his wife and youngest daughter in the building that doubles as a ranger station. Once that far I couldn't stop. I drove south down Lago Pehoe to see the hotel built on an island in the blue.

The first issue was finding diesel. The park map didn't indicate any filling stations but I assumed one of the lodge or ranger areas must have one so I continued on past Pudeto. This was a bad time to be wrong. No luck at the Pehoe area though I snapped a photo of the hotel on the island. I had ½ a tank left so wasn't too stressed yet but I didn't want to have to back track

tomorrow with Jose for diesel and cut in to our puma search time. I did make the effort to ask someone at the gift store. He pointed to the place on the map (his map actually showed a gas station) so I thought I understood enough of his Spanish. When I got there I found a visitor's center and a bunch of abandoned looking buildings, no obvious fuel pump. Did his map hanging on the wall date from a time when there was a station there? At this point I didn't feel like asking again because I was close to the turn off for Lago Grey which is the best road to see the Huemul, an endangered native deer species. I drove out and back without seeing anything but birds. You can catch a glimpse of the Grey Glacier far away but I didn't take the time to walk to the shore's edge to learn if you could get a better view without riding the boat. Starting to worry for the first time about gas I decided to go in the visitor's center. I was pointed back to the cluster of deserted looking buildings. A man outside the deserted buildings pointed me to an out of the way building that proved larger than its appearance after getting past some trees. It was a lodge of sorts but the kiosk or little store out front was closed. Eventually someone saw me and a young man walked out. I explained my interest in diesel and he confirmed that he did have some. Then he hit me with the good news, 8,000 pesos per 5 liters. After some back of the envelop math that comes out to near \$15 dollars per gallon—ouch! Do you take credit card? Not for gas. I bit the bullet and bought 10 liters for about \$36 to make sure fuel didn't infringe on my puma search tomorrow. I figured Jose could help me figure something out tomorrow. On the drive back to the hostel I kept thinking about the diesel—I needed enough for 2 days of puma searching and also to get back to Puerto Natales over 100 miles away. For the first time I wished I had the car I had reserved instead of the truck. Back at the hostel I had an excellent dinner and then asked the bi-lingual girl at the front desk about fuel. Maybe at the hotel up the road, if not, maybe in Cerro Castillo 45 minutes away. That wasn't encouraging. At that point I just needed to sleep so I found my bed, one of 6 in a small room, but the sheets were clean and it was comfortable enough for me.

I woke up at 3:00 in order to meet Jose on time. He was waiting for me at 4:20 when I arrived. His wife and daughter were asleep in the other rooms. The kitchen and bathroom were directly off the back of the living/dining room which was adorned with puma and family pictures. I had definitely found the right guide. The other ½ of the house had a ranger station/office and a plain room with two single beds to house rangers or guests as needed. After a few pleasantries and awkward questions as I tried to gauge his English and he my Spanish, what I had assumed from the emails was confirmed—this was going to be an adventure in every sense. Jose has been a ranger for 25 years. We drove quickly for the first 10 minutes before we entered the prime puma range. After some trial and error we figured out how to say faster, slower, and stop, especially important while spotlighting because I can't exactly see what he is seeing. His spotlight hooked to a loose car battery and cast a yellow light that continually swept both sides of the road. I had seen a flicker in my headlights on the drive over and tried out my new LED spotlight on a chilla where I had seen 3 young ones playing outside a den the day before. We settled into the routine which would consume most of the next 2.5 days, driving back and forth across the two roads that enter the park's East side and the road that connects them outside. After an hour or so I decided

we were going slow enough that I could drive and use my spotlight at the same time. Shortly thereafter we saw a flicker off to our left on a hillside. We stopped and locked in on a pair of eyes glowing back at us. It was too dark to see anything but the shine, but Jose pronounced “puma.” We stared at the eyes for a minute and then pulled forward to get a better angle in hopes of illuminating the body. We never saw the eyes again. We got out of the car and moved up the slope as the sun rose behind us. Two guanacos on opposite ridges were sounding the alarm confirming it was a puma. We searched in vain for several minutes but eventually conceded and returned to our truck. The wind was our constant companion and then the rain joined us. We lasted until about 9:30 and Jose said the rain was too much to find pumas so we returned to his house. We were there from 10-2 which gave me time for a 90 minute nap in the truck and a nice lunch with his wife. They were watching CNN on the satellite tv which was showing footage of the protests in Egypt over President Mubarak. The windmill behind his home is in perpetual motion and provides all the necessary electricity for their household. During lunch someone stopped at Jose’s station looking for fuel—they said there was none available at the Torres Hotel so another possibility was ruled out. I was struck by the irony of simultaneously watching CNN on satellite, using wireless internet, seeing Jose’s daughter texting on her phone and at the same time knowing that there wasn’t a gas station anywhere near the park.

In the afternoon we spent much less time in the car, presumably for several reasons. To save our diminishing diesel and also because during that time of day the pumas are less active and more likely to be found bedded down somewhere then walking someplace visible from the road. Jose is intimately familiar with the Eastern part of the park and each time we left the car it was to hike to specific place with either a particularly good vantage point or to check a cave or thicket for recent puma sign. The feeling is simply different when you are out of the car looking for a predator on foot. There was a bit of anxiety, but mostly adrenaline and excitement. I could have walked around with him all day. I would have learned much more on this trip if I could speak Spanish, but there is something enjoyable about the way a relationship can develop without a lot of verbal communication. I find I’m more patient and less judgmental of others when I can’t understand them. I tend to give them the benefit of the doubt and hope that they do the same for me. I quickly came to respect and like Jose and I believe he did the same for me. There is something especially satisfying about humor that crosses language and cultures. When Jose could make me laugh or vice versa there is a special quality.

A spectacular rainbow provided a dramatic raindrop for a group of guanacos and my pictures turned out nicely. Jose led me all over the Eastern side of the park and through some areas on the outskirts as well. We always stopped at the ranger stations we passed where he would drink coffee or the Chilean hot beverage of choice, smoke a cigarette, and visit with the rangers just long enough for me to be anxious to be on the road again. My favorite places to explore were the rocky outcroppings common to the tops of the hills. We would look in the crevices and under the overhangs for sign of pumas. Under one overhang we found the bottom halves of all 4

of a guanaco's legs with fur still attached. We hadn't missed that puma by long. There were also petroglyphs in that overhang. The view looking down on the valley and river below was worthy of home to enjoy it, but that would have ruined it. The entire time we spent hiking we did not encounter another person other than those who passed by on the road. It was as if we had the backcountry to ourselves, even though we never got more than a mile from the road. There's enough undulation in the land to let you feel further away and more remote than you really are from the roads. On one excursion we split up and walked up opposite sides of the small stand of trees that lined a shallow valley. The thought of flushing a cougar was exhilarating. The guanacos are so heavily concentrated in the East side of the park that it is hard to drive more than a minute or two without finding one or more. Laguna Azul offers an almost fairy-tale like view of Las Torres.

It is hard to go very far without finding guanaco bones. I've seen several carcasses in various states of decomposition but apparently nothing new enough worth scavenging. I think the most recent carcass was at least a week old. We walked through several small valleys that felt like guanaco graveyards. Jose says the pumas kill about 3 per week and there are 22 pumas in the area we are concentrated in so that makes 66 per week and 3,432 per year—I guess that's what it takes to keep the population in check! I heard conflicting numbers later on the mortality rate of young guanacos, but it is safe to say that less than ½ reach maturity. In retrospect there would likely be even more bones visible if there weren't so many hidden beneath the bushes. After hiking to a valley overlook where the wind nearly blew us back from the brink we returned to the road to watch a herd of nearly 100 guanacos. Jose said to be quiet and watch so we sat down to see if a puma was on the prowl. After about 15 minutes we crossed the road and Jose showed me why we had been waiting. About 20 yards off the road, beneath a massive calafate bush (a large dark, blueberry type berry) was a well worn lane where a puma had clearly lain in successful ambush. In the maze of shrubs we found several carcasses various stages of decomposition. It may as well have been an all you can eat buffet for the puma.

Jose talked me into staying in the spare room for the rangers that night rather than driving all the way back to the Hostel, he couldn't have been more generous in hosting me for the next two nights. The good news is I got the best night's sleep I've had in forever...the bad news is that Jose either didn't understand that I wanted him to wake me up, or he was too shy to so when I woke up at 6:15 am we had missed our chance to spotlight and were almost two hours behind. The upside to sleeping in didn't take long to present itself, but I'm sure it was the only positive about it. At the top of the rise above Jose's house is a turnout for a view of Los Cuernos, the Paine Massif. The early morning sun lit it up like no other mountain I have ever seen. I can only hope the aura is caught on the pictures. No puma this morning. We saw where one had laid in the grass, where one had eaten a guanaco in the last week underneath a rock ledge, and on and on. There are a lot of pumas here but they still aren't easy to find. I'm also using his personal supply of diesel that he siphons from a couple of 5 gallon cans. We've used the first one, and I have to save the second one to get me back to Puerto Natales tomorrow.

The highlight of the afternoon was hearing a loud guanaco call while looking for pumas. We walked over the rise and found two male guanacos fighting, presumably for dominance and the inherent rights to mate. They were chasing each other and clashing with their necks, chests, and hooves. I snapped quite a few pictures as they engaged each other for several minutes. At one point they got so close to me that my 200mm lens could not capture a whole body in the frame. That seemed so oblivious of my presence I was anxious for a moment and relieved when their battle drew them further away.

And I didn't think this trip could get more adventurous, I should have known. I think this is the first time I've ever written in my journal while sitting in a car with a dead battery on the side of the road in Torres del Paine at 7 in the morning before the gates officially open and there is any hope of traffic. When was the last time I was hoping for traffic, or at least another car in a National Park? I might add that I don't have jumper cables. I might also add that I found out the battery was dead after Jose and I got back to the car from taking pictures of the puma we found this morning! That's right, we found a puma! Two actually, but one of them left before the sun came up so we only saw its eyes. The pressure was on this morning and we could both feel it. Jose woke me up this morning at 4 am—we made sure last night that it was clear we were to wake each other up should either of us wake up. We loaded up quickly and hit the road with about 90 minutes of darkness left (a car just sped past us while I was typing and Jose was looking at his video camera—oops, I honked but they kept going). From his house at Pudeto drove to the junction and took the left turn towards Lago Amarga rather than Sarmiento, it proved to be the right choice. At around KM 17 we found eyes with the spotlight on the driver side of the vehicle. I stopped quickly and Jose said the long awaited word, "Puma." It was about 5 AM so for the next hour we moved up and down the road in the truck scanning our light across the hillside. On one of our scans we caught a second set of eyes near the first. It eventually disappeared over the ridge. It was dark enough all you could see were the eyes when they were looking back at the light. I've never been so anxious for the sun to come up. Gradually the light grew, though obscured by clouds and another hill. After 45 minutes we could make out the puma clearly through our binoculars. I would guess she was 100-150 meters off the road. She had settled down with a guanaco kill and was in no hurry to leave. Soon it was light enough to see her with the naked eye when she faced us. She was lying down but would turn her face towards us revealing some distinctive white fur on her chest. I briefly bemoaned my moderately priced camera lens knowing that the pictures would succumb to the poor lighting and lack of steadiness. Even with my bean bag resting on the truck, the combination of poor lighting and constant wind made keeping the camera still enough impossible. So we watched, waited, and enjoyed it. About 6:30 the light was a bit better and Jose said it was time to get closer. I wasn't going to argue. He said there has only been 1 puma attack ever in the park, I'm not sure if that is attack, or fatality, but apparently they are not as much of a hazard here as they can be in North America. We crept down the slope away from the road to a small ravine where we could get a better view. She obviously knew we were approaching, and to our chagrin, but not surprise, she didn't like it. She got up and walked over the rise behind her. Once she was out of sight, Jose

and I ran down and then back up in hopes of seeing her on the other side. She turned and walked briskly up and across a long hillside. I snapped poor photos and enjoyed the moment as guanacos sounded their alarms at her passing. In a matter of minutes she had disappeared from sight for good. We walked back past the area where she had been bedded down. I assumed we were looking for the kill, but we didn't spend long. I'm not sure if Jose was concerned about approaching it, or if he really thought it would be difficult to find amidst the shrubbery. Oh well, at that point it didn't matter much, we had seen a puma! After the first car had passed us, I put the hood of the car up to indicate we had problems and Jose got out of the car so he could wave anyone down. Within 10 minutes another car came by and politely stopped. I started in broken Spanish and was relieved when they responded in English. Jose is now in their car enroute to his house to return with his car and jumper cables. Well we only had to wait a total of 80 minutes. Life is looking better again. While we were waiting I tried to tell Jose about Jim's saying that you can choose to laugh or cry when there is a problem, so you may as well laugh. He said I was bad luck and we shared a hearty laugh.





















