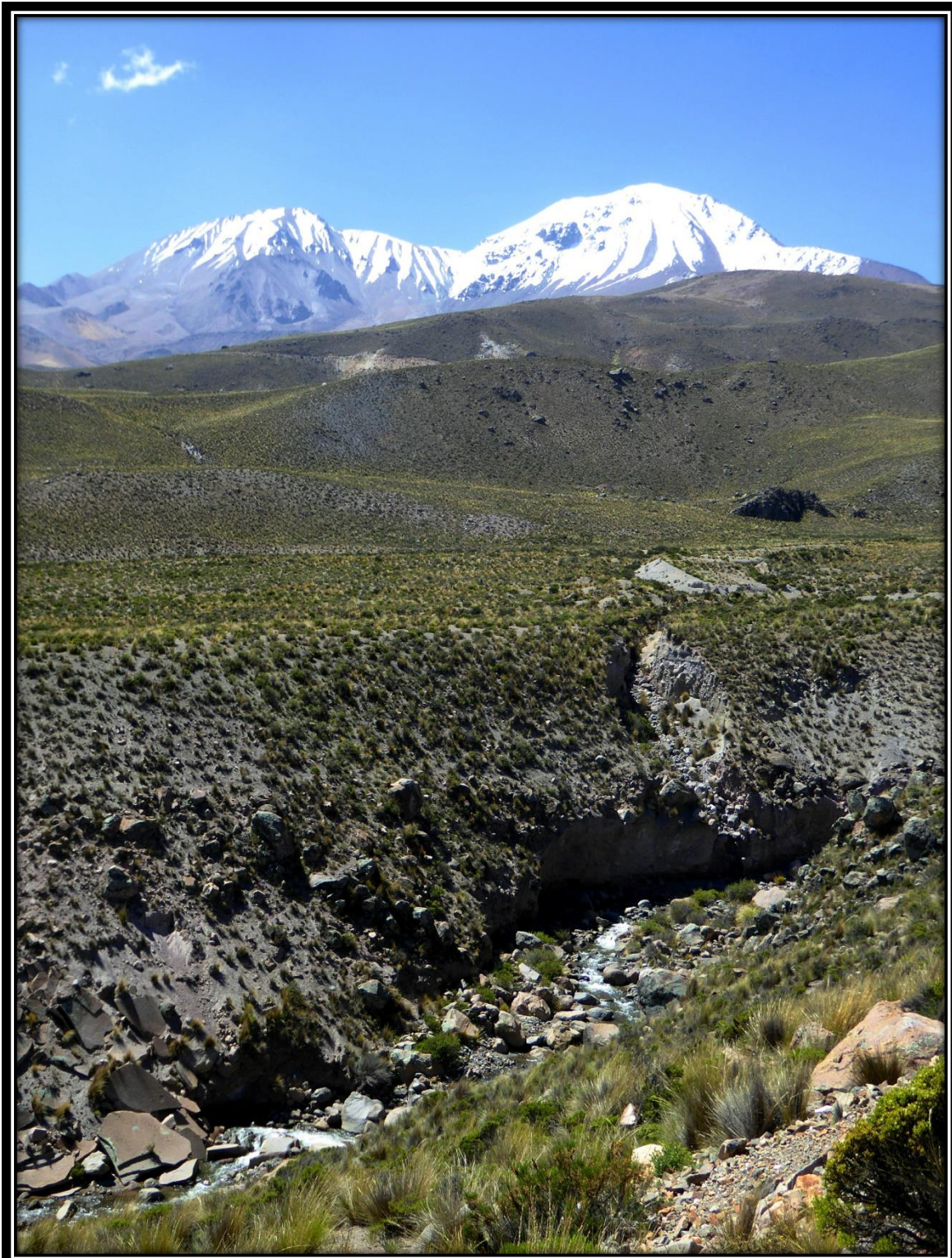


**Report on a Mammal Watching Trip to Chile
(with notes on Argentina)
11– 30 March 2018**



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In March 2018 I travelled with a friend, Chris Biles to southern South America and spent 19 days on an independent trip focused on travelling, but also seeking out specific mammal species. Several trip reports proved useful in our preparation, in particular Jon Hall's 2009 report to Chile.

We flew from Heathrow via Sao Paulo to Buenos Aires, before flying south to El Calafate, then minibus into Chile (Torres del Paine NP) a self-drive south to Puerto Arenas and ferry to Tierra del Fuego. From there, a return ferry and flight to Puerto Montt (to access Chiloé Island) then flight to Arica, in Chile's far north. Self-drive to Putre and Lauca NP before flying home via Santiago.

I booked all flights through Trailfinders <https://www.trailfinders.com/> (we flew LATAM) securing discounted tickets on our internal flights and a minibus transfer between El Calafate and Torres del Paine. Accommodation was arranged independently, though I booked the Rio Serrano Hotel in Torres through Trailfinders making use of preferential rates. Outside the tourist hubs Spanish (even my halting attempts) proved useful. As to costs, accommodation and eating out was inexpensive; transport (air and road) reliable and efficient (but be prepared for frequent toll booths on Chilean motorways). The people (even officialdom) we invariably found polite and friendly, the acid test being when we strayed into a military area and got let off with a smile! The mammal watching did not disappoint, particularly when framed against spectacular scenery.



Southern South America

Buenos Aires - Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve

I had read about Costanera Sur prior to travelling and was keen to see this prime site for nature located (literally) on the doorstep of a vibrant city of nearly 2.9 million people. There is a chain of reserves lining the River Plate, but this, arguably, is the most accessible and productive. At this time of the year (March) we found two of the three major lagoons within the reserve dry. However, the Laguna de la Copos (Coypu Pond) running parallel to the reserve access points still held a good depth of water. The reserve is some 350 hectares in extent. The downside is it is only open Tues-Sat and from 0800 to 1800 (Apr-Oct) and 1900 (Nov-Mar). We stayed ten minutes away at the Amerian Hotel <https://www.amerian.com/hotel/amerian-Buenos-Aires-Park-Hotel>.



Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur

The site is well known for its bird life (Southern Screamers, Rufescent Tiger-herons and Freckle-breasted Thornbirds amongst several highlights). Reptiles and amphibians include the impressive **Argentine Black-and-White Tegu** (*Tupinambis merianae*) one of which turned up by the café at Acceso Viamonte and **Hilaire's Toadhead Turtle** (*Phrynops hilarii*) frequenting Laguna de los Copos. There is also a population of **Crossed Pit Viper** (*Bothrops alternatus*) so stay on paths!

For mammal watchers the main attraction is **Coypu / Nutria** (*Myocastor coypus*). Given our visit coincided with the drought the animals were concentrated on the single remaining body of water. Wandering 'round we saw half a dozen animals. The one in the photo swimming close by as we consumed our dinner on the adjoining promenade. **Brazilian Guinea Pig** (*Cavia aperea*) is apparently numerous here, mostly seen early morning, together with a small population of **Lutine or Little Water Opossum** (*Lutreolina crassicaudata*). At dusk we were treated to an acrobatic display by some twenty **Brazilian Free-tailed Bats** (*Tadarida brasiliensis*). The site also records **Hoary Bat** (*Lasiurus cinereus*) and the area by Acceso Viamonte looked promising for this species.



Coypu *Myocastor coypus*

Torres del Paine NP

Having flown to El Calafate, primarily to visit the spectacular Perito Moreno Glacier, we were then driven by minibus across the border to the Rio Serrano Hotel reservas@hotelrioserrano.cl located just outside the boundary of Torres del Paine NP. The transfer took about three hours, through lonely, sweeping country. It afforded our first views of **Guanaco** (*Lama guanicoe*) Lesser Rheas and Chilean Flamingo. Around the border crossing point we saw a **Patagonian Gray Fox** (*Lycalopex griseus*) sunning itself on a grassy bank while another attempted to dispossess a traveller of her sandwiches, solely, it seemed, through the power of concentrated thought! Arrangements at the Rio Serrano included all meals, all treks and NP fees. I thought it economical. I would recommend a superior room, i.e. facing the Torres del Paine. The 'back' rooms are a little mean by comparison. The resident guides are good value, speak excellent English and are enthusiastic, particularly with those who share their passion for wildlife. Immediately surrounding the hotel were good numbers of Upland and Ashy-headed Geese, together with a few **European Hare** (*Lepus europaeus*).

On the first afternoon we took the Largo Sarmiento Trail with a small group of other guests. I had a particular reason for wanting to take this trail. It offers the only realistic opportunity to see **Southern Huemel** (*Hippocamelus bisulcus*). In 2012 a fire ravaged the NP. 40% of its woodlands destroyed and a disaster too for the already-endangered Huemel, of which only 25 animals may still live within the park. One, lone female remains in the vicinity of a campsite on Largo Sarmiento and when the mini bus slowed down and I looked out the window as to why, there she stood! Despite passing by this spot again on subsequent forays, it was to be the only time we saw her.



Southern Huemel (*Hippocamelus bisulcus*)

The next day we elected to take the Aónikenk Trail (the name for the original people who once lived here). On this trail **Guanaco** is present in large number hence the Aónikenk Trail's other name, the Puma Trail!! The Guanaco allow close approach (unlike elsewhere on our journey). We had about covered the entire trail and were wending our way back to the waiting minibus when we sighted a female **Puma**, as did the National Geographic film crew who'd been anxiously awaiting her appearance. The trail at this point is on the very boundary of the park and there is a fence line, which the Puma proceeded to walk along, some 60 metres in front of us, until she came to a vantage point. Here she paused, looked out at the surrounding country and then turned and passed under the fence and out of view. However, as we continued along the trail ourselves it became apparent that she'd not gone far, as unconcernedly, she watched us pass as she lay up in the lee of the adjacent hillside. Not bad. Not bad at all. The Corporación Nacional Forestal, the governing body of Chile's national parks estimate the population of Puma within Torres del Paine NP at 50 animals (est. mid-90s, but the good news is that this population is thought to be stable). The next day we left Torres NP headed for Puerto Arenas, but within fifteen minutes we saw our first **Culpeo** (*Lycalopex culpaeus*) crossing the road in front of us. In Torres one has to work for wildlife sightings however the rewards can be very good. It's also excellent for Andean Condor.



Guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*)



Puma (*Felis concolor patagonica*)



Puma (*Felis concolor patagonica*)

Tierra Del Fuego

Having driven to Puerto Arenas, we stayed at the Hotel La Yegua <https://www.yegualoca.com/> . Their signature lamb garrón is worth the journey alone. The walk to the seafront to see thousands of Imperial Cormorants roosting on the jetty is worthwhile (and affords a good lookout for seabirds and possible cetaceans). Light conditions are best late afternoon. The next day we visited the Reserva Nacional Magallanes, about a 15 minute drive north of the town. Sunny, warm (!) and a sole Magallanes Tapaculo, but the only mammal was **European Rabbit** (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*).

I was uneasy about catching the ferry over to Tierra del Fuego, given the most likely prevailing sea conditions. Unusually, it was a millpond. Soon we saw our first Black-browed Albatross and Rock Cormorants, but only when we reached the harbour at Porvenir did a pod of four **Peale's Dolphins** (*Lagenorhynchus australis*) briefly ride the bow. We checked into our accommodation, the Yendegaia House www.yendegaiahouse.com which I'd absolutely recommend and drove the 112 kilometres south to the parquet Pingüino Rey, site of the only King Penguin colony on mainland South America. Yes, they are birds, but.. On the journey south, hugging the coast the weather was glorious (much as it remained for the entire trip) and we were accompanied by more pods of **Peale's Dolphins** close inshore, frequent groups of **Guanaco** and a pretty relaxed roadside **Culpeo** .



Andean Fox or Culpeo (*Lycalopex culpaeus*)

After dinner, having returned to Porvenir, Chris managed a brief view of a **Chilean Myotis** (*Myotis chiloensis*). The next day we elected to take the shorter ferry route back to the mainland via Puerto Espora. Once underway, two Magellanic Penguins swam past, followed by a **Commerson's Dolphin** (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*). An absolute beauty and soon they appeared in every direction! Having reached Puerto Delgada we set up watch on shore and were still able to elicit good views. However, the badly decomposing whale close by did influence the duration of our stay! On the way back to Puerto Arenas, by the airport, we got lucky, as a **Big Hairy Armadillo** (*Chaetophractus villosus*) attempted to cross the road in front of us (he was unharmed in the act).



Not mammals, but a definite highlight.

Chiloé Island

The trip south from Puerto Montt takes about two hours on a good, fast road. At the ferry we had a single **South American Sea Lion** (*Otaria flavescens*) lounging on nearby rocks. Surprisingly, we saw no further pinnipeds (nor cetaceans) on the short journey across to the island. We stayed at the Mirador de Mechaico on carretera 5, just south of Ancud. It's basic, but the people who run it are very friendly. The main reason for choosing it was to access the Chepu River and its Southern River Otters. The first morning however, arriving at Chepu village it appeared devoid of humanity. And that meant no available boat to take us down river! A second attempt also proved fruitless. We instead headed south and then west of Castro to our hotel deep in the forests and a chance for **Darwin's Fox** (*Lycalopex fulvipes*), **Southern Pudu** (*p.pudu*) and perhaps, **Monito del Monte** (*Dromiciops gliroides*) (ok, so we were ambitious!). However, it all came to nought. Earlier rains had knocked out a bridge and access to our accommodation at this very promising site was denied us. For the record, the house is called Casa Autonomo Tepuhueico. You may have better luck. On our return some compensation came in the form of several **Cinnamon Red Bats** (*Lasiurus varius*).

The next day we tried Chepu again. 'Popeye's', as mentioned in Jon Halls' 2009 report appeared closed. However, Chepu Pesca y Turismo, located sharp right after one crosses the bridge into Chepu, was open for business. A successful negotiation for a two hour trip and we were off! Be clear that it is the otter you wish to see (if indeed that is the case) and not **Coypu**, which is the 'default' mammal here (only when I communicated my mammal-watching priority with a copy of the animal's photo did the peso drop (which, to be fair, actually says more about my Spanish). Two hours later, despite a good sighting of Lake Duck, it looked as though we had dipped on the otter. However, the boatman knew his river and began to ply the craft close to a promising-looking bank with thick undergrowth. Just then a head popped up, looked straight at us, swam a short distance and then dipped below the surface again. An endangered **Southern River Otter** (*Lontra provocax*) (!) the populations of which are now isolated from one another and still declining After a few moments it came up for another look and then was gone. Short, but sweet.

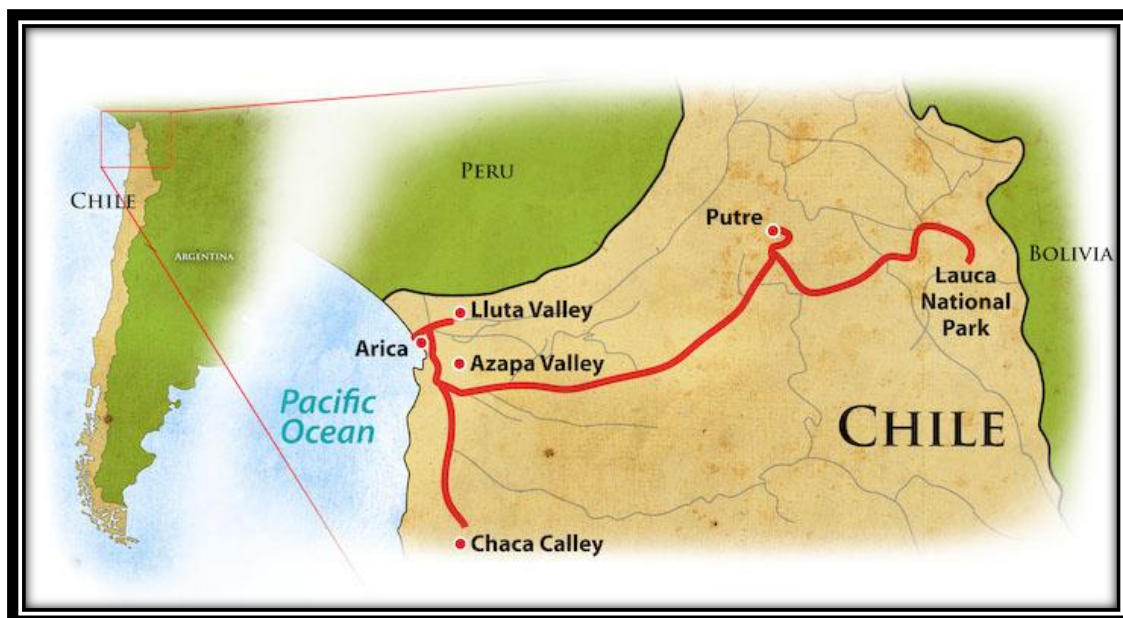
In the afternoon we drove the few miles to Puniuil on the north west coast of Chiloé. I was hoping to make it two otters in one day given this is a reliable site for **Marine Otter** (*Lontra felina*). Its islets are also the only known shared breeding site for Humboldt and Magellanic Penguins. Unfortunately, a major outbreak of pollution emanating from the local salmon industry have put paid to the otters. We spoke to the manager of a local boat tour company, who advised that sightings were now rare (even the penguins weren't around much at this time of year). From the beach restaurant we instead watched the tourist boats go out into a very choppy sea. I think we had better views of the resident **Peale's Dolphins** from shore than those unfortunates on board. We stayed at Vertentes de Pumillahue located south of Puniuil Bay. A bit pricey, but you get a whole house for your money, overlooking a stunning bay and always a chance of otters/ whales.

Whale watching Chiloé

This proved difficult to organise, although I contacted [Ecomarine Puniuil](#) before our departure, in the hope that a pelagic might be running. I was told that it's highly weather dependant, but notwithstanding, whale watching is still in its infancy here. Yet an important population of **Blue Whale** is found off Chiloé from end Jan to Apr, together with **Humpback Whales** and with a chance of **Chilean Dolphin** (*Cephalorhynchus eutropia*). Several operators can be found at Quellon in the south of the island, a two and half hour drive from Ancud, but we had no time to investigate this option further. However, in season the cliffs at Puniuil offer reliable (distant) cetacean viewing.

Huerquehue NP to Putre

From Chiloé we made a long trip north, to Pucon, to access Huerquehue NP and its spectacular stands of **Araucaria** (*Araucaria araucana*). For me, one of the must see sights of Chile (but sadly yet another endangered species). We then began the last leg of our trip with a drive to Temuco and flight via Santiago to Arica, close to the Peruvian border. As flights into Arica tend to arrive in the evening we booked the well-appointed Hotel Apacheta <http://www.hotelapacheta.com/en/>. Starting out early next morning we drove up the Lluta Valley to Putre (about three hours travelling time). While this isn't a botany log, a signature species of this arid area is the **Candelabra Cactus** (*Browningia candelaris*). It is a vulnerable species. Populations have dropped 50% in 40 years. Putre is located at an altitude of 11,483ft (3,500m). It's advisable to stop off here to acclimatise before attempting the further climb up to Lauca NP. NB there is no petrol station in Putre or at any point along Ruta 11 on the road to Lauca. However, we were able to buy *noventa cinco* from the supply held by our hotel, the Vientos del Antiplano. Stopping at the viewpoint overlooking the town I had a good view of **Andean Altiplano Mouse** (or **Andean Akodont**) (*Abrothrix andinu*). Continuing our drive a distinctive **Andean Mountain Cavy** (*Microcavia niata*) crossed in front of us.



Arica, Putre and Lauca National Park

Lauca NP

Spectacular setting and a beautiful cloudless sky for our last day in the field. It is estimated that a thousand **Taruca** (or **North Andean Huemul**) (*Hippocamelus antisensis*) still inhabit the NP and environs. One would have been nice, despite scanning all likely-looking hillsides. **Guanaco** were again present in good numbers, together with herds of domesticated animals, **Llama** (*Lama glama*) and **Alpaca** (*Lama Pacos*). With one or two stops for yet more avian goodies we headed onwards to Las Cuevas, for its resident colony of confiding **Southern Viscacha** (*Lagidium viscacia*). While across on the wet grassland (bofedales) of Las Cuevas, was a herd of twenty **Vicuña** (*Vicugna vicugna*) a smaller, delicate version of Guanaco. All four South American camelids in one place!



Southern Viscacha (*Lagidium viscacia*)



Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*)

Mammal Checklist

Big Hairy Armadillo (*Chaetophractus villosus*)

Andean Altiplano Mouse or **Andean Akodont** (*Abrothrix andinu*) **

Andean Mountain Cavy (*Microcavia niata*) **

Coypu /Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) *

Southern Viscacha (*Lagidium viscacia*) **

European Hare (*Lepus europaeus*) *

European Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) *

Chilean Myotis (*Myotis chiloensis*)

Brazilian Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*)

Cinnamon Red Bat (*Lasiurus varius*) **

Southern River Otter (*Lontra provocax*) **

South American Sea Lion (*Otaria flavescens*)

Patagonian Gray Fox (*Lycalopex griseus*) **

Culpeo (*Lycalopex culpaeus*) **

Puma (*Felis concolor patagonica*)

Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*) **

Guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) **

Southern Huemel (*Hippocamelus bisulcus*) **

Commerson's Dolphin (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) **

Peale's Dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus australis*) **

Lifers denoted ** First sighting in Neotropics denoted *