

Trip Report December 7-17, 2017

“Puma Extreme” Tour -- outside Torres del Paine NP, Chile



Mammal List:

Puma: Multiple individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Very Good

Guanaco: Multiple individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Excellent

South American Gray Fox: Multiple individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Excellent

Humboldt's Hog-nosed Skunk: Single individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Excellent

Large Hairy Armadillo: Single individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Poor

European Hare: Multiple individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Very Good

Mouse species (HELP! See photo): Single individuals, multiple days. Photo opportunities: Excellent

(PRE TRIP) South American Sea Lion: Multiple individuals. Photo opportunities: Good

Birds: > 50 species

I signed up for a fixed-date tour advertised through Arcana Mundi Expeditions (although SouthWild is the actual company used for this trip) titled “Puma Extreme”. The itinerary included 6.5 days of searching for pumas on private lands outside of Torres del Paine National Park, a half day photographing Andean Condors and transportation from Punta Arenas and back again. I arrived a day early and purchased a ticket on one of the short tours to Magdalena and Marta Islands in the Strait of Magellan for penguins and sea lions. Puma has been on my wish list for decades. A sabbatical and an understanding wife allowed me to travel at a time when I normally wouldn't be able to. Although it is possible to see pumas at all times of the year in Patagonia, I was keen to go when the days were long. I

discovered about two weeks before the tour was set to begin that no one else had signed up for the tour. Of course, this was good news. I wasn't going to have to worry about other guests and their fitness or interest levels. On the other hand, this meant we would not be using the guide and tracker system that is so effective. What they call a "tracker" I would call a "spotter". That isn't to minimize the role this person plays but rather describes it better. The tracker is not following spoor in the bush but rather looking for pumas with the naked eye and a spotting scope. Instead, we were a highly mobile pair. I was also given the opportunity to stay in simpler accommodations to avoid paying a single supplement for fancier lodging. I jumped at that and am glad I did. It meant no internet and electricity only a few hours in the evening, but the place was just what I was looking for. And since I was staying right on the private property, I took day hikes in the hopes of locating pumas in my "off time".

I can honestly say that I was a bit skeptical signing on to this tour due to a bit of hyperbole in the website's description. I am glad I didn't let that stop me. On all accounts, this trip was a huge success for me. Please note that this really was a puma-intensive trip. There was no effort on my part to search out any mammal species that are harder to find (such as the deer species) however I did take time to photograph all the species that presented themselves.

Here is my understanding of the current opportunities to view pumas in and around Torres del Paine National Park:

-No foot traffic is allowed off the trails in the National Park. Before travelling, I read one report that seemed to indicate that puma searching was not allowed off trail but, say, birdwatchers were allowed to go anywhere. I was told when I was there that no one is allowed off the trails.

-The Park is bordered by large ranches (estancias) which raise mostly sheep and to a lesser extent cattle. One of these estancias has abandoned livestock in favor of pumas. On this ranch, wildlife is allowed to flourish and guanacos provide food for a healthy puma population.

-Currently, there are only five companies that have permission to be on the particular ranch mentioned above. SouthWild, Far South, Wild Patagonia and two others. SouthWild is the company that employs several of the family members of the estancia. I interacted with guides and trackers from both Far South and Wild Patagonia and I was left with positive impressions of every one. After meeting the landowners and many members of their families, I am glad there was no question as to whether or not I really had permission to be on the estancia (we did run into two guides that were not where they belonged).

-It is certainly possible to see pumas both in the park and even on the roads leading to the park. But being on the private land really increased the chances of getting close to pumas.

9-Dec: Left Punta Arenas with Mauricio, my driver for the first leg of the day's journey. We saw numerous birds (including Andean Condor and Lesser Rhea) and ticked off guanaco, skunk and gray fox along the way. In Puerto Natales Dania replaced Mauricio (who took a bus back to P.A.) and we continued on our way to Torres del Paine. My lodging was less than a kilometer outside of the national park itself and afforded great views of the Towers.



That evening we went on our first puma search but saw none. I did, however, get great photos of Humboldt's Hog-nosed Skunk and a passable photo of a Large Hairy Armadillo.

10 Dec: First full day of "puma searching". The next six days followed a nearly identical pattern... Begin the day before dawn cruising the public roads that crossed the estancia and, depending on the results, drive or walk ranch roads or stake out a new kill. We would stay out for four hours. I had the bulk of the day to myself for lunch, hiking and catching up on my sleep then we would go out for another four hours in the evening.

530am: Dania picks me up for our first morning excursion.

540am: I am watching FIVE PUMAS emerge from the brush. We are about 50 meters away but the photos are not great as the sun is barely up and I am shaking from excitement. This is a family unit of a mother and three young that are almost two years old now, plus an adult female that has attached herself to them. The pumas were on the move and quickly headed over a ridge. We decided to drive around and up a ranch road to try and get another view of them. Instead, we encountered a lone, dark male. But he too was on the move and quickly moved out of view. So we retraced our route and in the time we had been gone, a different puma (#7 for the morning!) had killed a young guanaco (chulengo) near the road and we interrupted her breakfast. We were able to watch this puma for some time as she padded up a hill, across a ridge then back down to the road. Her front paws were covered in fresh blood and it looked like she was wearing gloves. When she reached the road in front of us she stopped at a drainage, drank and washed. She proceeded through the drain pipe under the road and when she emerged we drove towards her and I got some nice photos.



That was all the action for the morning. In the afternoon, we drove to a small parking area to glass the hillside in search of the five pumas from the morning. We never did find them but I spotted a group of three (different) pumas with my binoculars. This was also a “known” group (one yellowish, one reddish and one missing a piece of ear with the nickname Mike Tyson). Another guide was present with his two clients. We left a spotter at the bottom with a scope and started our way up. I am not sure what I expected to happen. I can say that at no time did I feel afraid. I mean, all we were doing was approaching three pumas in thick brush. What could go wrong? 😊 Sorry. I shouldn’t make light. But we were not the first photographers to ever approach this particular group of pumas. I was far too excited to care. The pumas were in vegetation called mata negro. If you are not familiar with it, think sagebrush and you are pretty close to the size and density. The spotter directed us over the radio and we knew we were close. We saw the reddish one squirt away, leaving us only a quick view of the tail end. We were spread out a bit now and I found myself between the two guides. We heard a noise nearby that was a bit like a chirp. Both guides snapped up their heads and I knew it was a puma. There, not 10 meters away, was a puma! This one circled around a bit giving me two opportunities for camouflaged portraits.



We found a vantage point and sat for a while hoping they would reveal themselves again, but they did not. To recap: In eight hours of searching, we found 10 DIFFERENT pumas. We never had another day like this one but we did see at least one puma every day. We had 14 puma encounters of at least 15 individuals. The oddest puma was nicknamed “Canine”. This is a female that had an injury to her lower jaw that presented as massive swelling in March. We found her on 13 December and she seemed healthy despite the injury. The swelling is gone but her lower left canine is no completely out of her mouth and only hanging by some tissue. I wish we got to see her longer but as Dania said “She isn’t friendly” and she quickly trotted from us. Here are a few photos of this incredible individual:



My closest sighting was on 14 December in the morning. One of the public roads on the estancia was closed for construction, but since Dania was a member of the family that owned the land, we obtained permission to be on the road before work began in the morning. At about 7AM, she spotted a puma walking to our right. She slammed on the brakes and I was able to catch only a glimpse of it as it walked out of view. We raced forward in the car to get ahead of it I was fretting the whole time that we were driving too far! We were going to miss it.... Dania (finally) pulled off the road and we quickly donned our backpacks. I had my camera in hand, telephoto lens extended and set to a fast shutter speed. We hurried along a ridge, crossed an old sheep fence and headed towards the puma on a guanaco trail. We both spent most of our time looking down the hill to our left, expecting the puma to have headed downhill. Suddenly, a wave of small songbirds flew at us and I had the thought that the puma had kicked them up when Dania said in a low voice "She is right here." Instead of being down the will, walking below us, this puma had just come into view, walking right towards us on the same guanaco trail. I put up my camera but she didn't stay still. Fortunately, all she did was continue down a parallel trail until she was only six meters away. She stopped twice. Once to look ahead and once to look at us. Despite my best efforts, I simply could not hold the camera steady in my excitement. We spent another 15 minutes watching her walk away. What a thrilling experience. This is why I had come. This is why I had banked on a tour instead of trying to find a puma on my own.



Happy to discuss more details with anyone that is interested. Contact me at jvnmammals@gmail.com

