

Patagonia Oct-Nov 2023

Trip Report

Summary

We spent 6 weeks touring Patagonian Chile and Argentina. Mostly a sight-seeing and hiking trip, we set aside maybe 25% of our time for seeking some of the iconic mammals of the region. We saw **27 species** (although 5 of them were introduced invasives) including highlights of **Darwin's fox**, **Southern huemul** and **Puma**.

We drove ourselves and had no guides (except a couple of times in Tepuhueico). The main mammal locations were: **Parque Tepuhueico**, **Raul Marin Balmaceda**, **Patagonia National Park**, **Torres del Paine** and the **Valdes Peninsula**.

Tepuhueico Lodge, Chiloe

Tepuhueico Lodge is now being run by Martin, the son of the original owner. He's got a new team (still learning in parts) but they seem very serious about finding wildlife, with trail cameras set around the park. They've also opened a whole new coastal section of Parque Tepuhueico which has a more open environment and has resulted in some good daylight sightings of kodkod (although obviously a big dose of luck still needed). There is a good spot for coypu the rangers can show you, although we weren't lucky.

We stayed 3 nights at Tepuhueico and went for night walks, morning walks and a morning boat trip in search of South American River Otter – Martin believes they are on the rivers around the lake but I don't think they've worked out how to find them yet, we certainly didn't get lucky.

Our stay started very well; we arrived at sunset, ate dinner, unpacked and then suddenly there was a **Darwin's fox** on the front veranda of the lodge! It was extremely chill, less skittish than a garden fox back home even though the door was open and we were under 4m away, and yet the folks at the lodge swore they hadn't been habituating it. I think we may have also seen the same animal on both night walks; the second night walk was just the two of us and it trotted along the track towards us, paused to check us out, then carefully trotted around us (i.e. less than 2m away) and off in the direction of the lodge.

We saw at least 16 **pudu** on each night walk, and on the first walk we saw 3 **monito del monte** (although the second night we saw zero even though we walked essentially the same ground). We weren't lucky enough to see kodkod, although Martin explained that there had been a male whose territory was right around the lodge but it had been found dead a couple of months ago – this might explain the good sightings on other recent trip reports.

That was it for Tepuhueico, apart from a few pudu seen on morning walks and a **hairy soft-haired mouse** that ran across the road. In the bay near Castro we saw pods of **Peale's dolphins** and a single **South American sea lion**.

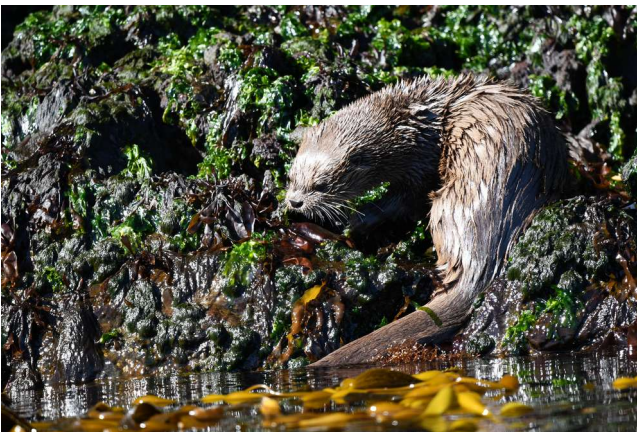


Raul Marin Balmaceda

RMB is a tiny fishing village 2 hours along a dead-end road from the Carratera Austral. Apart from being epically beautiful and isolated, you can take a boat trip out to Las Hermanas islands a couple of kilometers from shore and pick up a bunch of mammals. We saw **South American sea lions**, **Peale's dolphins** and best of all, two different **marine otters** fishing. Apparently South American fur seals are also very common but we spent so long with the otters that we didn't have time to look for them. From the beach at RMB we also saw **Chilean dolphins** in the fjord, also possible on the boat trip. There's amazing bird life on the Las Hermanas too, including flightless steamer ducks and four species of cormorant.

I'd recommend RMB to anyone taking a road trip down the Carratera Austral, whether you're looking for mammals or not.

We had one other very random mammal. On the road to RMB there is a hot spring called El Sauce. It's a lovely wild place with beautiful hot pools and we had it to ourselves. As we soaked in the pool, an **American mink** swam up the stream, hopped onto the poolside, trotted past us and ran off into the undergrowth. So... bizarre. As an aside: they are a real pest in Chile and we noticed some folks gave us an unhappy look when we explained how pleased we were to have spotted a mink.



Various spots on the Carratera Austral

One lovely spot on the Carratera Austral is Puyuhuapi, where you can take a kayak out onto the tranquil sea loch. Here we saw a couple of **South American sea lions**, and a pod of **Peale's dolphins** and two groups of **Chilean dolphins** swimming close enough that we could hear their breathing, quite magical.

One of our key targets was Southern huemul, which we tried for first at Cerro Castillo. We spent three hours from dawn driving back-and-forth along the high mountain road east of the village and picked up two **culpeo foxes** (one of which caught and ate a **brown rat**) but saw no huemul. Very disheartening, as the roadside has plenty of signs saying “Please stay more than 10m from the huemul” and “Please don't feed the huemul” - so they are definitely here! I noticed that the trees and the grass were all brown, with spring shoots only just beginning, so it's possible this road isn't visited by the huemul until later into summer?

On a gravel road south of Coyaique in the evening we spotted a **Molina's hog-nosed skunk** and a **European boar** as well as our first dozen **European hares** (we'd probably have seen 200+ hares by the end of the trip!).

Another good Carratera Austral tip: the little port of Caleta Tortel is an amazing place to visit, and a boat trip to the Jorge Montt glacier is a wonderful end-of-the-world experience. Contact Maria and Noel at Entre Hielos. If you go on an overnight trip, they visit spots where they see huemul “more often than not” (although, again, we were unlucky here).



Patagonia National Park

In the smaller southern “Tamango” section of the park we walked the Carpinteros Trail twice in search for huemul (confirmed by the ranger: this is by far the most likely place to see them). The first day we saw zero. The second day we first sighted 3 **southern huemul** on a hillside above the trail, and then a single female in the woods less than 10 metres from the trail. Great views, very happy.

In the larger “Chacabuco” section of the park you'll find hundreds of **guanaco** very easily. Following a tip we tried an early morning drive up the road from the park HQ to the West Winds campsite, and around a corner there was a young **puma** sitting in the road. A moment later it was joined by the mother (collared) and two other half-grown cubs. She was letting them finish eating a hare before going to bed, and we watched for half an hour only a few metres away. Amazing sighting. This was about 30 mins after dawn.

We also tried an evening drive and a night drive in the Chacabuco valley but saw absolutely nothing (except for a **Molina's hog-nosed skunk** outside the park on our way back to town). We tried a couple of suggested spots for Wolffsohn's viscacha in the daytime, but didn't see any after some time waiting. Crossing into Argentina at the east end of the park (Paso Roballos) we picked up a **South American grey fox (chilla)** right by the road and she relaxed until another car came along. There were also flamingos and rheas along the road, and Andean condors above.



Torres del Paine

We tried one evening drive, one night drive and one morning drive on the park road to the Amarga gate and then onto the public roads east of the Amarga gate. Apart from plenty of **guanaco** we only found one **puma** on the morning drive along the Y-160 (the night before we spotted a recent guanaco carcass and returning to that spot in the morning the puma was on it). The Sarmiento gate road was completely closed and the Y-150 had huge roadworks all the way along it: these are supposed to be some of the best areas, so that might have not helped our chances.

We spoke to one ranger and he seemed to imply that the success of the pumas has made other animals (foxes, grison, skunks) very rare and hard to find. He also didn't rate anyone's chance of seeing a huemul. Torres del Paine was a bit disappointing as a mammal location, although fantastic for hiking, but I guess it probably is still the most consistent place in the world for pumas? I hesitate to recommend Patagonia NP instead based on our one lucky sighting.

Oh, and finally we got **European rabbit** by the road on the way to Puerto Natales.



Valdes Peninsula (and Argentine coast south)

We reached the coast at Puerto San Julian and headed north, not having time to stop at Monte Leone NP. Following other reports we drove the road to Bosques Petrificado de Jaramillo slowly at 11am and then back at 1pm and we did see a **grey fox** but we saw absolutely zero Patagonian maras. At Caleta Olivia we spotted a couple of **South American sea lions** near the beach, and on the strip of old highway south of the sea lion colony we saw 3 **Southern mountain cavy** in the late afternoon.

We stayed in Gaiman at the Posada Los Mimbres (great tip Jon! Marcela is lovely and cooks an

amazing steak), but the Chubut river was in flood and we didn't see any coypus or armadillos. We tried a night drive back along a couple of gravel roads, as we had had a brief sighting of 2 **Patagonian maras** earlier in the afternoon, but the night drive showed up nothing.

From Puerto Rawson we took a boat trip out and got good (but brief) sightings of **Commerson's dolphins** in heavy grey seas. There are sea lions here too. We drove north to the **Southern elephant seal** colony at Punta Ninfas where you can scramble down to the beach and get great views of the seals. No signs of passing orcas – we later learned that they are only spotted one or two hours either side of high tide. Otherwise it's quite a long 3 hour round-trip on gravel; there are much more accessible elephant seal colonies like Isla Escondida.

Back in Gaiman we consoled ourselves with a Welsh high tea, and then spotted a single **coypu** in the Chubut River behind the tea room.

Driving onto the Valdes Peninsula we had our first **large hairy armadillo** run across the road, but he stuck around for photos. From Punta Piramides we got distant views of **Southern right whale** in the gulf, but apparently November is too late to spot them coming very close to the shore. We tried to access the San Pablo de Valdes nature reserve following Jon's tip from 2018 but the gate was locked – the reserve is run by Fundacion Vida Silvestre and after I dropped them a line they did offer to open it up a few days later, but of course we'd already left.

So instead we drove at dawn along the southern road that bends north to Caleta Valdes. We picked up 4 pairs of **Patagonian maras** and a burrowing owl but nothing else except hares and guanaco. We watched for 3 hours at Caleta Valdes but no orcas showed up, then we overheard some researchers being radioed that 2 orcas had appeared at Punta Norte – so we followed them and had an exciting 45 minute race along gravel roads at [DELETED] kph but arrived in time to hear that the orcas had only passed through and were gone. There was a **large hairy armadillo** entertaining all the tourists in the car park by way of consolation.

The southern road has a good mix of scrub and grassland, so we tried a night drive there. In two hours we saw nothing but hares and sheep. Then just before turning back a rodent ran straight out under my tyres. Even at 25kph I couldn't react in time. So we squashed a **bunny rat**. Even worse, there was a small young one with it, still wandering about on the road and then eventually off into the grass.

Leaving the peninsula we stopped at Playa Garipe for a breakfast picnic, and lo and behold there were at least 3 pairs of Southern right whales relaxing and cruising just a few metres from the beach. It's a very unexpected sight! We also saw the only Geoffrey's cat of our trip: squashed on Ruta 3 just a few miles further north.

That's it for mammals. If you really need to see **grey fox** then back over the border in Chile they haunt all the car parks and cafes of Vicente Perez Rosales NP waiting to be fed sandwiches. I couldn't quite frame a photo of this tourist sitting in his car throwing food to a fox on the roadside in front of a big sign saying “Don't feed the foxes”. This also looks like good environment for kodkod.



Stuff we missed

Our small cat curse continues, as we didn't see **kodkod** or **Geoffrey's cat** even though there's probably a decent chance of the one on Chiloe and the other on Valdes. We thought we should get **Wolffsohn's viscacha** so it was disappointing to dip on them. It would have been good to see **orcas** but based on the recent sightings I think you'd need to put in 3 days on Valdes to have some reasonable confidence. The small **pichi** armadillo would have been nice, or a **grison**. But otherwise I think we saw everything we might have reasonably hoped to, given we weren't totally focused on mammal watching.

Trip list

27 species, including 15 new to our life list

Species	Tepuhueico & Chiloe	Raul Marin Balmaceda	Carratera Austral	Patagonia NP	Torres del Paine	Valdes & south
Monito del monte * (<i>Dromiciops gliroides</i>)	3					
Large hairy armadillo * (<i>Chaetophractus villosus</i>)						2
Bunny rat * (<i>Reithrodon auritus</i>)						1
Hairy soft-haired mouse * (<i>Abrothrix hirta</i>)	1					
Southern mountain cavy * (<i>Microcavia australis</i>)						3
Patagonian mara * (<i>Dolichotis patagonum</i>)						8
Coypu (<i>Myocastor coypus</i>)						1
Southern right whale (<i>Eubalaena australis</i>)						>10
Peale's dolphin (<i>Lagenorhynchus australis</i>)	Pod	Pod	Pod			
Commerson's dolphin * (<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>)						4
Chilean dolphin (<i>Cephalorhynchus eutropia</i>)		2	Pod			
Guanaco (<i>Lama guanicoe</i>)				>10	>10	>10
Southern Andean huemul * (<i>Hippocamelus bisulcus</i>)				4		
Southern pudu (<i>Pudu puda</i>)	>10					
Puma * (<i>Puma concolor</i>)				4	1	
Culpeo fox (<i>Pseudalopex culpaeus</i>)			2			
Darwin's fox * (<i>Pseudalopex fulvipes</i>)	3					
South American grey (chilla) fox * (<i>Pseudalopex griseus</i>)				1		1
South American sea lion * (<i>Otaria byronia</i>)	1	>10	4			>10
Southern elephant seal * (<i>Mirounga leonina</i>)						>10
Molina's hog-nosed skunk * (<i>Conepatus chinga</i>)			1	1		
Marine otter		2				

<i>(Lontra felina)</i>						
Introduced species						
Brown rat <i>(Rattus norvegicus)</i>			1			
European hare <i>(Lepus europaeus)</i>			>10		>10	>10
European rabbit <i>(Oryctolagus cuniculus)</i>					2	
Eurasian wild pig <i>(Sus scrofa)</i>			1			
American mink * <i>(Neovison vison)</i>			1			