



## Southern Chile Mammal-watching 2023

### Malcolm “Mac” Hunter

In early December 2023 we (my wife Aram Calhoun, plus our friend and colleague, Lindsay Seward) escaped the 8-hour days of our Maine homes for a multi-faceted trip to Chile: mammals, frogs, and birds. Our primary destinations –Chiloe Island and Torres del Paine NP—are well known to mammalwatching.com readers so I will try to succinctly update and supplement existing reports with some species-specific information rather than provide a comprehensive trip report.

A bit of background: Aram and I have a goal of seeing as many vertebrate families as possible and on a 1999 trip to central Chile and Patagonia, we had scored our first wild camelids and five new bird families. For this trip the focus was two new mammal families, four frog families, and the irresistible pumas that have become so visible in recent years.

**Puma** At Torres del Paine we opted for “do-it-yourself” puma seeking and planned on six dawn/ dusk excursions to the “puma zone” east of the park. We were based ~40 km away at Cerro Castillo, in Riverline Lodge (where they were happy to accommodate early departures by substituting packed lunches for the breakfast buffet). A [recent Mammal-watching report](#) that mentioned the Sarmiento gate and road

being closed concerned us, but we soon figured out that there was another route (Y-160 & Y-166) to the north of the main route to Amarga gate that had little traffic and good numbers of guanacos. On our second evening, at 21:22h near the junction of Y-160 & 166, we were scanning the hillsides above us and almost drove by a pair of pumas because they were so close, <15m away, walking parallel to the road. (Kudos to Aram for looking over her shoulder!) We watched and followed as the female, with the male close behind, walked a couple hundred meters, later vocalizing repeatedly, and laid down. ([Here is Lindsay's cellphone video.](#)) She kept looking back at him, but he seemed cautious about approaching. Eventually he walked up to and mounted her, which she terminated with a burst of aggression that sent him flying. ([Mating video.](#)) About a minute later a second female appeared (!!!) and immediately made her interests much more visible, presenting her tail-end to him, even wrapping her tail around his neck. He sniffed her genitals but seemed unable or unwilling to mate with her. The first female was lying down, watching from <8m away, seemingly unphased by the presence of the second female but when she eventually walked off the male quickly left the second female and followed her. We could not resist providing imagined dialogue: “Wait honey. She means nothing to me. She was coming onto me and I didn’t do anything.” All three moved into some shrubs and it was getting very dark so we headed home ... chattering excitedly about some of the best 50 minutes of wildlife watching we had ever enjoyed. We speculated endlessly about what we had witnessed. Was he unable to copulate with the second female because of the short interval? Was he unwilling because she was pregnant or not in oestrous? Was she soliciting his interest to make it less likely he would kill her cubs? Was the second female his sister? Daughter of the first female? The encounter left us with many questions, even after we later read about puma mating.

We returned to the area twice more, morning and evening, and saw no more pumas, but had lots of fun watching **guanaco** behavior. Interestingly, we saw no foxes or skunks, in contradistinction to our 1999 visit to this area. Some tips: the timing for our evening outings (given sunsets after 21:00h) was made easier by eating dinner at two nearby hotels, Gouien House and Hotel Las Torres, that were willing to serve dinner to non-guests. If you are able to camp, Laguna Azul is an attractive option just northeast of the puma zone. And gas availability is a continuing constraint; Riverline Lodge had some to sell but it disappeared quickly.

**Magellanic tuco tuco** At the last minute we added tuco tuco, a new family for us, as a target after learning that they were regularly reported from a King Penguin Reserve on Tierra del Fuego. Visiting them would be a bit daunting—a 15-hour day with driving over 400 km and two ferries—and success was far from guaranteed because we would be there midday, when odds of seeing them above ground were low. Fortunately, the cooperative guides allowed us to walk the roped-off trails alone during the one-hour penguin tour. We found dozens of burrows, a small portion of which had a fresh apron of dug sand and at these we lingered hoping to get a glimpse. A smaller portion were accessible from the trail and for these we laid down and listened with an ear to the burrow entrance. Finally, as our hour was ending, Aram was rewarded with a series of sounds that give the tuco tuco their name, ending with a burst so loud that she jumped back for fear that the tuco tuco was about to penetrate her ear. Lindsay and I followed her lead, listening then jumping back, even though we had been forewarned. So this encounter will go down as an “audible only” but that seems fitting for one of the few mammals named for its vocalization.

A word on logistics: to be here at dawn or dusk would be a long haul from Porvenir. One might get away with roadside camping, but if you were prepared to camp a better option might be up in “puma country” where Laguna Azul has a wonderful campground and a handful of tuco tuco burrows.

**Monito del Monte** As an endemic family these were a higher target than pumas for Aram and me. After dipping on a spotlighting/thermal-imaging attempt at a known private site we decided to take advantage

of our connection to a researcher who was live-trapping them. Thus we enjoyed a very close encounter: prehensile tail wrapped around our fingers. His radio-tracking work suggested they are most active on rainy nights and from midnight to 3am, especially in November after hibernation. That seems a good match for [Jono Dashper's 2019 report](#) with lots of monito sightings. Bamboo appears to be a key habitat feature. With that in mind we scoped out what might be a great place to try on a future trip: the road up to Osorno Volcano, from about 1.5 to 3.5 km up the road from its entrance.

**Chilean Dolphins** are regularly seen on a Magellanic penguin colony [tour from Queilen](#). We had excellent views of three adults and a calf. We also had a short view of two **Commerson's dolphins** from the Primera Angostura ferry on Tierra del Fuego.

**Southern Pudu** seemed common and fully diurnal near Tepuhueico Lodge. We had lunch with a doe and fawn browsing <10 meters away and saw three others.

**South American gray foxes** continue to be “pan-handling” at multiple locations around Rio Petrohue and Vulcan Osorno.

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Finally, beyond mammals we managed to score 3 new frog families, notably the endemic Darwin's frog that required four trips *totaling* about 6 hours. A wonderful bird highlight was seeing four species of tapaculo ... and for Lindsay her first penguins.