

Chile and Argentina trip report, February 2025.



While Tracey and I were visiting friends last summer, they showed us recent pictures from a hiking trip to Torres del Paine National Park in Chile. The scenery looked wonderful, the weather less so. That got us thinking about a trip to Chile with potentially better weather as well as lots of mammals, and hence this trip.

As usual the trip started with the ferry over to Vancouver. More unusually, we saw a group of Canadian River Otters near the shore as we passed one of the Gulf Islands, which I took as an auspicious sign. Check-in was uneventful and the wind which had delayed the inbound flight was now in our favour, so we landed in Toronto on time. In Santiago, the attendant checking us in was a

Canadophile and we had a friendly discussion about the joys of maple syrup. More importantly, she didn't weigh our carry-on bags as the other check-in staff were doing. Our evening in Puerto Montt was notable for the carnivorous nature of dinner. An order of chicken resulted in being served two enormous and juicy chicken breasts from a bird apparently the size of a rhea, while Tracey's hamburger order consisted of two gigantic patties and nothing else apart from our separate order of French Fries.

We picked up a rental car the next morning and drove to the Costanera mall to find a camp stove. Doite, a Chilean camping store, came through with a compact stove that ran on canisters of butane. We retrieved our bags and headed to Pargua, the point of departure for ferries to Chiloe Island, arriving just as a ferry was about to depart. The roads on Chiloe were surprisingly busy in the towns and we didn't arrive at Tepuhueico Lodge until after 7:00 pm. After a delicious dinner (there are no other kinds of dinners at Tepuhueico) we headed out for a walk and almost immediately bumped into a family of three Southern Pudu very close to the lodge. As other reports have noted, Tepuhueico is Pudu (and Pudu-spotters) heaven. We saw a further three Pudu that night as well as a brief look at a Monito del Monte which quickly disappeared amongst the branches.

A before-breakfast walk produced another Pudu, followed by an epic breakfast. We then walked a series of trails, passing a waterfall and ancient trees. Lots of birdlife was in evidence, but no mammals unfortunately. An afternoon nap was followed by another Pudu-spotting session until rain started about 6:00 pm. After a dinner of salmon and pumpkin risotto, we walked several of the roads and trails near the lodge, seeing what was likely another Monito del Monte in the thermal imager in addition to the ubiquitous Pudus. Several small grey/black bats flying around were identified as Chilean Myotis by a lodge guide. We checked a couple of buildings for roosts but did not find any active ones.

The following morning, we drove around to the northern entrance of the coastal zone of Tepuhueico park and had a lengthy hike along the coast and back through the interior of the area. The only new mammal was a Long-haired Grass Mouse which darted into the underbrush by our feet, but the walk was lovely and a picnic at the Muelle del Tiempo overlooking the ocean was magnificent. After the hike, we drove north to Cucao to the south end of Chiloe National Park. I had understood there was a campground in the park but was informed this was not the case. We drove a little way north to Camping Manzano which was a lovely open area with shaded campsites, hot water and no other guests. After supper we drove to the bridge in Cucao from which Andreas had seen Southern River Otters but without success, so we drove out to an expansive beach for a walk instead.

We drove to Queilen the next day for a dolphin-watching tour only to find that the company I had emailed wasn't offering tours that day. They directed us to another place by the harbour which had a boat going out at 12:30 or, as I understood it, 2:30. We sat by the pier and watched a Peale's Dolphin swimming in the harbour, before heading over to a small restaurant for a gigantic sandwich of beef and melted cheese. While wandering around town shortly after 12:30 we were accosted by someone from the boat company, who gave us a quick lift back to the harbour. As we headed out, we had a brief look at a South American Sea Lion in the shallows, followed by close views of Peale's Dolphins near Tranqui Island. The tour was rounded off by a visit to a penguin colony on a small island.



We drove to Castro and visited the historic cathedral before finding some empanadas to eat by the shore. We then drove to Chepu, which turned out to be a few houses straggling along the road. Just short of a wooden bridge we found what appeared to be an information booth which was closed but a chap smelling strongly of alcohol said that he knew the otters and could find someone to take us out to see them in the morning. He asked for a time and we exchanged WhatsApp numbers. He told us that there was a spot to camp down the road, but the only place that had a sign advertising camping looked deserted. While we were investigating, an Israeli man and his son drove up and said they had camped there the previous night. It was quickly becoming grey and misty so we set up the tent and retired to a covered room with a fire pit to warm up. Rain and wind persisted throughout the night.

We drove back to the pier for 7:00 am and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no one was there. We did see a mouse with a short tail run across the road on the way. We texted the chap from the previous evening and a boat and captain showed up a few minutes later, apologizing that they had understood we wanted to go out at 8:00 am. The captain offered us two options – to go up the river now and take a lower chance of seeing otters or wait a few hours until the tide was higher and ascend another river that supposedly provided better chances of seeing one. Thinking that we would then have another chance if we missed them on this trip, we opted to ascend the river now. We passed a Coypu on a grassy riverbank and then, shortly before entering a large lagoon, the captain suddenly pointed at two Southern River Otters swimming in the river. The otters swam quite close to the boat, staring inquisitively at us as otters do. After circling the lagoon, we re-entered the river and saw the two otters again as they swam downstream and briefly climbed up on the river bank. A little way down the river, we came across another two otters who also swam quite close to

the boat allowing for photographs to be taken. We drove back to the campsite to collect our gear, then drove to Punihuil after stopping for lunch in Ancud. We parked on the wide sand beach and walked along the shore, seeing lots of birdlife but no Marine Otters. We camped for the night at a spot on the way back to the ferry dock.





The ferry from Chacao to Pargua provided views of Peale's Dolphins and South American Sea Lions. We arrived in Vicente Perez Rosales National Park about noon and had a picnic in the parking lot at Petrohue before hiking up the trail to Mirador los Alerces. We drove back to Ensenada to find a camping spot and returned to the park after dinner. Stopping at the entrance to the waterfalls we had brief views of a South American Grey Fox as it crossed the road twice near the garbage containers. There were no signs of mammals near the hotel so we staked out a spot on the road near the garbage bins, always one of my favourite locales for wildlife observation. A young chap emptying garbage told us that there was a fox den near the beach parking area, so we drove over there but saw nothing of interest. By 10:00 pm we still hadn't seen anything at our stakeout so we headed back to Ensenada for the night.

A truck across from the washroom had its engine running all night and headlights on. When Tracey questioned the owner, she was told this was because the battery was poor. I can't make this make sense. We drove back to the waterfalls, which had far fewer visitors today, and were rewarded with a sighting of a family of South American Red Foxes. In the afternoon we drove to Relun to a campsite on the Roncavi estuary, then returned to the park in the evening. A South American Grey Fox was again seen near the parking area for the waterfalls, but even more distantly than the previous day. Our stakeout by the garbage bins produced a brief sighting of a Grey Fox but nothing else. A Grey Fox was also seen again near the waterfalls parking area, but it seemed to have a preternatural ability to disappear as soon as I lifted the camera, only to reappear shortly afterwards. I can't remember having met many such camera-shy animals before.

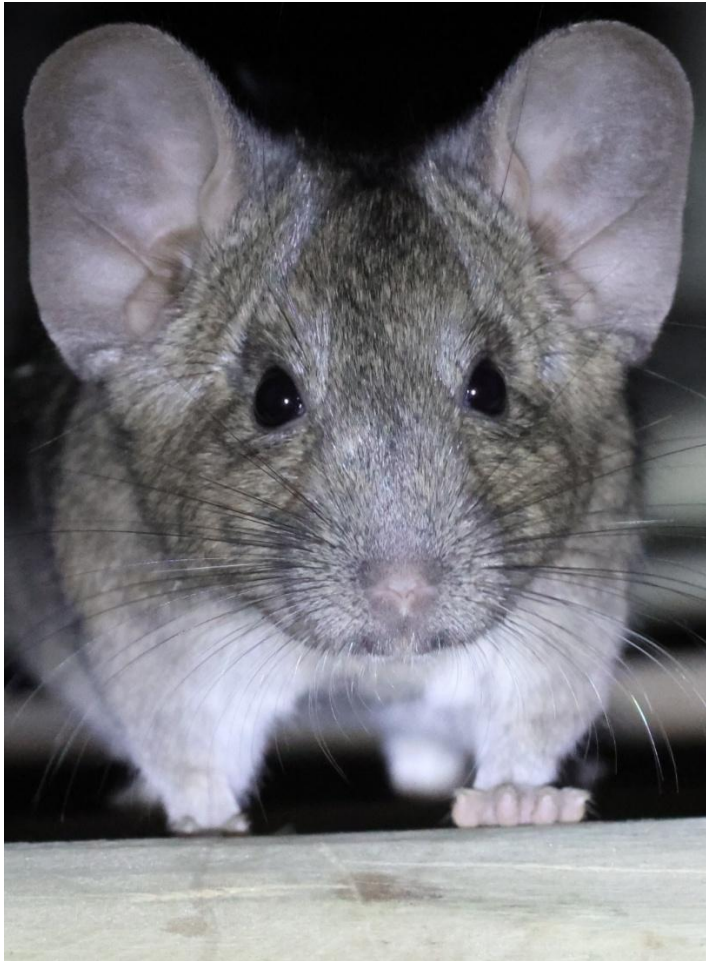
We travelled to Puyehue National Park the next day and walked several short but pretty trails. In the evening, I saw a Culpeo Fox by the road and a Monito del Monte on the Salto Indio trail.

The next morning, we had a nice view of a European Hare on the grassy field across from the park restaurant before packing up and leaving. The drive back to Puerto Montt was uneventful. Before returning the rental vehicle we decided to get it washed, as the chap at the rental company had emphasized the fines if it were returned dirty. We eventually located a car wash in the underground parking area of a mall and had it detailed, only to be told upon return that washing was only necessary if it were REALLY dirty, whatever that means. We had dinner at Fuente de Aji, a popular restaurant close to the malecon, which served probably the best sandwich of my life, a monster filled with steak, mushrooms and melted cheese. To try to avert a coronary event we followed that by a walk along the malecon to an open-air concert celebrating the 172th anniversary of Puerto Montt's founding.

After a quick flight to Santiago, we met with Alejandro and his wife Liza, grabbed some breakfast sandwiches at Starbucks and headed to the Humedal de Batuco just outside Santiago. The sought-after Coruros proved elusive, but we enjoyed good views of Coypus and waterfowl. We continued on to Cachagua, a beach town popular with Santiago's elite and, most importantly, a good site for Marine Otters. We quickly saw a pod of Common Bottlenose Dolphins and then a Marine Otter swam along the rocks below us. It briefly clambered onto shore while a second one was spotted swimming in a rocky cove. After a stop for cheese empanadas, we continued on to Reserva Las Chinchillas, arriving about 8:20 pm. Our first new animal was a Common Degu, glimpsed briefly by the entrance to its burrow. Atacama Myotis emerged from their roost in the visitor centre and a Culpeo Fox appeared near the start of the trail behind the centre. Bennett's Chinchilla Rats were visible in the pile of logs behind the building. We walked the trail behind the visitor centre and were rewarded with brief views on an Elegant Fat-tailed Opossum in the branches of a large bush. Several European Rabbits rounded out the night's sightings.



Alejandro and I went for a walk the next morning and spotted at least two Olive Soft-haired Mice. We checked several Coruro burrows but weren't able to see the actual animal. Back at the visitor centre, Tracey and Liza were watching the Degus, supported by a cast of birds which came to the small waterhole there. After lunch we visited the Nocturama with Jaime, one of the park rangers. I was surprised by how much larger the domestic chinchillas were than their wild counterparts. Supper was followed by an unsuccessful session at the waterhole to see if the Culpeo might show up on its evening rounds. We drove to the chinchilla colony before dark to see if one might appear while there was still some daylight but to no avail. After dark fell, we initially saw one Long-tailed Chinchilla through the thermal imager, then a couple of them across the arroyo for a total of six or so that evening. A Culpeo Fox also put in an appearance. Well satisfied with the night's endeavours we drove back to the visitor centre for some chinchilla rat photography, then headed to bed.



We left early the next morning for the drive to Limache, Alejandro and Liza's current hometown. After stashing our bags at Alejandro's office, we walked up a nearby trail for another attempt at Coruro spotting. Although we found some fresh-appearing diggings, the architects did not make an appearance. In hindsight, it had been a hot and dry summer, so perhaps nighttime would have been a better time to try to spot them. We did get a good look at a South American Grey Fox.

A quick drive to the airport and we were off to Buenos Aires. We landed just before 8:00 pm and started negotiations with the head of the local taxi mafia, who was demanding exactly twice what we had been informed was the going rate. Ten minutes of negotiations got the price down by a third and off we went to an apartment downtown. We then went out for pizza at Guerrin, a Buenos Aires institution. The place is cavernous but packed, the pizzas are covered in more cheese than one could imagine possible, and the place is humming until 2:00 in the morning. If you eat here more than once you might want to pack a statin to help lower your cholesterol back to normal.

The next day we spent wandering around Buenos Aires before dinner at Pepito's and ice cream at Heladeria Cadore. I realize this isn't a restaurant report, but mammal-watchers need fuel and both spots were outstanding. National Geographic has ranked Cadore as one of the top ten ice cream shops in the world and, although I'm not sure why they would be in a position to judge, I have to agree with them.

The next morning, I was filled with trepidation at the thought of braving BA's traffic in a rental car, but it turned out to be much easier than anticipated. A quick circuit of the block put us onto an expressway and heading north. Unfortunately, I had been worrying so much about the driving that I neglected to notice that, having typed Parque Nacional El Palmar into the GPS, the map directed us to a street by that name in Crespo, a town in Entre Rios several hours west of our intended destination. After a discussion with a friendly shopkeeper, we bought some groceries and headed east. I wish I could report that our lengthy detour resulted in us seeing an exceptionally rare and unusual creature. Unfortunately, I cannot. The only mammal seen was a Brazilian Guinea Pig, something I had seen before and would see multiple other times on this trip. At about 9:00 pm, approximately six hours later than planned, we arrived at the entrance to El Palmar. The entrance was partially blocked by a barrier but there was plenty of space to drive around it. The 12 km drive to the campground revealed abundant Greater Capybaras and Plains Viscachas. We arrived at the campground just past 9:30 and no one appeared upset by our late arrival, probably because this is still before dinner time for most Argentines. I was so tired that my Spanish largely deserted me and the campground attendant started communicating with me via a translation app, the only time this has ever happened to me in Latin America. I was too tired to care.



I was not, however, too tired to forego a walk around the campground. As well as the abundant capybaras, we also found at least two Nine-banded Armadillos. As many aficionados on this site will know, the Nine-banded Armadillos have recently been split into four species, so these are now split from the similar armadillos in the US, Mexico, Central America and the Guiana Shield.

After walking some of the trails the next morning, I returned to the campsite for breakfast and Tracey and I drove down the Arroyo de Loros road. On the way back, we stopped at the parking area for the bird hide and continued on foot, which turned out to be a great decision when two Lesser Grisons ran across the road. We saw a third Lesser Grison by the side of the road as we were driving out. Later that afternoon we did another drive along the road through the park. Several Chital ran across the road while on the return drive two Crab-eating Foxes were seen on the road along with the ubiquitous capybaras and viscachas. The night drive revealed more of all of these species but no new ones.



The night was punctuated by such loud calls from the viscachas that I got up to investigate at 3:40 am in case a predator was hunting them, but it appeared that they were just settling some internecine dispute amongst themselves. An early morning drive revealed a Pampas Fox as well as previously-seen species. We did a drive and then hiked at Tres Cruces but saw no new species. By lunchtime the temperature had reached 36 degrees Celsius so we went for a swim in the river. Afternoon rain didn't do much to alleviate the heat and humidity. We headed out on a drive about 6:30 pm. One invariably sees lots of mammals on drives in El Palmar, the main question being whether the mammal tally will be 98, 99 or 100% capybaras. This evening's drive produced 4 Lesser Grisons and 2 Crab-eating Foxes on the Arroyo los Loros road, followed by a Six-banded (Yellow) Armadillo and, when we later returned to Arroyo los Loros again, a Grey Brocket Deer. Interestingly, the side roads that had been barricaded by 7:00 pm the previous night were still open at 8:00 pm this night when we returned. I did a night hike later that evening and had a brief glimpse of what was most likely a Geoffroy's Cat back in the bushes beyond the road.



The following morning's drive didn't turn up any new species so we packed up camp and left by 8:30 am as the sky turned ominously darker. As soon as we were back on the highway the heavens opened, to the point that we considered pulling over a couple of times, mostly to avoid the potholes which were now obscured by pools of water. Things improved after a couple of hours and we stopped for lunch at a parilla by the side of the road. I had a baguette with three enormous slices of steak in it, a sandwich which would put any steak sandwich in North America to shame. The drive back through Buenos Aires was uneventful and we saw one Greater Capybara before arriving at El Manantial shortly after 5:00 pm. El Manantial is the estancia where Jon stayed in December of 2023. It is no longer as inexpensive as it was then but is still an outstanding place to stay. After a brief swim in the pool we started into a two-hour dinner, from appetizers to various cuts of beef to crème brulee for dessert.



The next morning Tracey and I hiked along the nearby river, seeing European Hares, Coypu and one Brazilian Guinea Pig. We went out after breakfast with Gervasio, the owner of the estancia, in his 4WD and observed a Pampas Fox. After lunch and a nap we sallied forth again around the estancia and found three Large Hairy Armadillos in addition to species we had seen previously. The family still owns an original house of de Rosas from the early 1800's. After expressing interest in seeing it, Gervasio took us on a personal tour of the buildings, which still contain many original artefacts and a Myotis, which interested me more than it did Gervasio. Another sumptuous dinner was followed by a walk through the estancia where I saw a Brazilian White-eared Opossum as well as species seen previously.



Rain the next morning provided a good excuse for a lie-in before heading out on a walk about 7:40 am. A further hike after breakfast likewise didn't turn up any new species. We had a leisurely lunch and then drove to Campos del Tuyu National Park. Unfortunately, Google Maps again let us down, delivering us to a garbage dump on the edge of the town of General Lavalle. Not wanting to prematurely admit defeat we gamely hiked along some settling ponds where we saw a couple of guinea pigs before heading back into town for further directions. A friendly gas station attendant directed us to the park office, which was closed for the day, while a further lead led us to the national park boat launch on the river, which was also closed for the day. Taking that as a hint, we continued to Mar Chiquita and checked into a nice hotel with a view of the beach before going out for a homemade pasta dinner at Alborada. A scratch on my chest from an insect bite decided to develop into cellulitis which made for an uncomfortable night.

We walked along the beach and estuary the next morning waiting for the town pharmacy to open. Large fish were jumping clear of the water but we didn't see any Franciscanas. Fortunately, I managed to stub my toe on a sand-covered rock so painfully that the discomfort from my cellulitis was almost totally forgotten. After a nap and a swim, we drove out to the Nahuel Ruca lagoon area inland from Mar Chiquita, seeing Pampas Fox, Large Hairy Armadillo and Brazilian Guinea Pig.

I had been thinking of doing a boat trip the following day if we didn't see the Franciscanas yesterday but the next morning the winds were strong and the waves were high. We walked along the estuary

and then departed for Buenos Aires in the late morning. A pleasant stay in a guesthouse near the airport and one last super cheesy Argentine pizza dinner rounded out the trip.

In all, we had a great trip. My thanks in particular to Alejandro Bello for his guiding in Chile and to Gervasio and his family for their hospitality at El Manantial, despite their incredulity that I was really interested in seeing bats and rodents. As always, thanks to Tracey for her willingness to plunge head-first into any adventure which presents itself and to Jon and Andreas for extremely detailed trip reports which helped to guide us on this trip. Chile and Argentina are great destinations with good infrastructure, magnificent landscapes and unique wildlife. I hope this report encourages others to explore them further. Please feel free to contact me for further details or to correct any errors found in the report.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, Canada

ibtson@yahoo.com

List of mammal species seen:

1. Brazilian White-eared Opossum – *Didelphis albiventris*
2. Elegant Fat-tailed Opossum – *Thylamys elegans*
3. Monito del Monte – *Dromiciops gliroides*
4. Nine-banded Armadillo – *Dasypus novemcinctus*
5. Six-banded Armadillo – *Euphractus sexcinctus*
6. Large Hairy Armadillo – *Chaetophractus villosus*
7. European Rabbit – *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
8. European Hare – *Lepus europaeus*
9. Sanborn's Soft-haired Mouse - *Abrothrix sanborni*
10. Olive Soft-haired Mouse – *Abrothrix olivacea*
11. Brazilian Guinea Pig – *Cavia aperea*
12. Greater Capybara – *Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*
13. Plains Viscacha – *Lagostomus maximus*
14. Chilean/Long-tailed Chinchilla – *Chinchilla lanigera*
15. Bennett's Chinchilla Rat – *Abrocoma bennettii*
16. Common Degu – *Octodon degus*
17. Coypu – *Myocastor coypus*
18. Chilean Myotis – *Myotis chiloensis*
19. Atacama Myotis – *Myotis atacamensis*
20. Unknown Myotis – *Myotis sp.*
21. Peale's Dolphin – *Lagenorhynchus australis*
22. Common Bottlenose Dolphin – *Tursiops truncatus*
23. Chital – *Axis axis*
24. Southern Pudu – *Pudu puda*
25. Common Brown Brocket – *Mazama gouazoubira*
26. Geoffroy's Cat – *Leopardus geoffroyi*
27. Crab-eating Fox – *Cerdocyon thous*

- 28. Culpeo – *Lycalopex culpaeus*
- 29. South American Grey Fox – *Lycalopex grisea*
- 30. Pampas Fox – *Lycalopex gymnocerca*
- 31. South American Sea Lion – *Otaria byronia*
- 32. Lesser Grison – *Galictis cuja*
- 33. Marine Otter – *Lontra felina*
- 34. Southern River Otter – *Lontra provocax*