

Central Chile June 20–26 2025

Jan Ebr

For the second part in the series of trips motivated by all the people wondering why I have seen so few animals in the southern cone even though I am usually there once or twice a year, I stopped by in central Chile. In 6 days, I saw just 7 species of mammals, but 4 were lifers, including two new families. Doing a trip like this during a work-related journey has the benefit of not having to pay for the airfare since I am already there, but driving around in a rental car alone turns out to be a bit expensive per person - the whole outing cost me over 700 bucks!

Biologically, central Chile is essentially an island. The Andes are such a powerful barrier that many species are very efficiently restricted by it. On the one hand, this means some interesting endemism, on the other, it somewhat explains the poorer overall diversity. Culturally, Chile is also different from its eastern neighbors - and not always in a good way. After having struggled with access across many sites in Argentina, I almost laughed out loud when I learned that Chileans consider Argentina the “land of the free”, thanks to its abundant access to nature. In Chile, every single private property must be, allegedly, fenced off by law and trespassers can be, allegedly, shot without consequences. In the following days, however, I quickly realized that the joke was on me, since I was visiting the land-of-the-not-so-free indeed.

Besides Las Chinchillas, which is one of the greatest reserves I have ever been to (more on that later), I rather struggled with getting ... anywhere. There are a handful of sites that can be accessed here and there, some closed on some weekdays, some not, but none really allowing nighttime access - so besides Las Chinchillas, I had to do my nighttime mammal searches mostly around random country roads.

The ubiquitous fences make wild camping very difficult. To make it even worse, all camping - or at least tent-camping - options in state (Conaf-managed) reserves have been permanently removed (reportedly for the fear of wildfires) and every private campsite I tried was either abandoned, closed for the winter, or for the particular part of the week I happened to be around. I thus had to spend 3 more nights in accommodations instead of the actual nature I was interested in.



Common Degu at the „waterhole“



*Bennett's Chinchilla Rats at the pile of wood in Las Chinchillas and
by E445 north of San Felipe*

I arrived to Las Chinchillas on Friday evening and immediately opened the question of staying there overnight, which was warmly welcome with the offer of a cabin for 9000 pesos per night, a real bargain, so I stayed for two nights (but they have only one cabin, so reserving ahead would have been smarter). I continued with questions about mammals and received an equally warm response, getting all sorts of information. Later I learned that this was a bit of luck - there are two pairs of rangers taking turns and I happened to get the choice that is much more sympathetic to mammalwatching - Boris and Jaime. Boris even told me to contact him (+56 9 9090 6163) if I ever come back to make sure he is on duty.

The visitor center has a small waterhole and next to it a colony of **Common Degu**, which you can watch to your heart's content, together with an assortment of birds that are coming to drink and a tame **Culpeo** that lives around. In the night, I found a **Bennett's Chinchilla Rat** on my first visit to the famous pile of wood behind the visitor center, but saw none during my subsequent stops there; then later one was rummaging through the bushes near the entrance gate. A short trail leads around the visitor center which should be good for Yaca (Elegant fat-tailed mouse opossum), but I haven't seen any in the two nights.

A vehicle track leads 2 km northwest to a parking where a slightly longer trail starts - this track is in principle driveable in a normal car, but I preferred to walk it. The trail at its end leads to a rocky viewpoint, directly below which is a Long-tailed Chinchilla colony, but I found no animals in a few dark hours. The place is a bit inconvenient for chinchilla-watching as there isn't a good vantage point to watch the area without moving around. After learning about my lack of success at the viewpoint the next day, Jamie took me in the afternoon with the Conaf 4x4 to show me where another colony was - which I presume is the one Jon's report mentions. This is a few kms south on the main road and then 2.5 kms on a rather rough track. The track is behind a locked gate, but in hindsight, the trick to open it is obvious - still, you should arrange this with the rangers as Jaime notified the people living there of my plans for a nighttime visit. There is a very large Coruro colony opposite the chinchilla one, but during our brief stop, we saw no animals.

Given the short distance and the low clearance of my i10, I was prepared to park by the road and walk the track at night to get to the colony, but I was able to get Christian, who was staying in the reserve overnight with a camper and his family, to take his Landcruiser and drive me. There the landscape is much better and one can comfortably watch the colony from a distance, which we did, using my Pulsar and its ability to broadcast the image to the cellphone screen. We watched a few **Long-tailed Chinchillas** run around and then I took a few photos for documentation, but the chinchillas really did not like white light, so I did not want to bother them too much. While Christian, who is Chilean, has travelled the nature of his country extensively, this was a new experience for him and he genuinely enjoyed it and even did a search around hoping to see more animals.

For the next two days I mostly looked for Marine Otters (Chungungo) along the coast, but with no success. Getting to the coast here is again a very Chilean experience, with large parts of it simply fenced off or outright



Long-tailed Chinchilla



Coruro

built over - the development is obviously getting out of hand in recent years and everything is new everywhere. I found access at Playa Agua Dulce and at the fishing port in Chigualoco (north of the beach), but failed to get anywhere near water at the large peninsula south of Los Vilos due to impassable roads. The best site in this area however was BioParque Puquén in Los Molles, a private reserve where the local staff even confirmed the regular presence of otters below the aptly named Mirador Chungungo. The entire reserve is also essentially covered in **Coruro** holes. I waited by some particularly fresh ones for 20 minutes and after someone passed by and left, one animal popped up, exactly as Jon has described. Being completely dark, a Coruro is really noticeable against the light-colored soil, even when watching the wrong side of the colony. There is also a very loud **South-American Sea Lion** colony just off the shore.

Further down the coast, I particularly liked the coastal trail in Cachagua, allowing access to kilometers of coast, but neither there, nor along several other random stops in Maintencillo (they even have Café Chungungo!) and Concon, did I find any otters. A morning brisk hike up and down 700 meters of altitude in La Campana brought nothing of note.

My nighttime attempts were not much more remarkable than the daytime ones. The first night I just explored the large garden at my accommodation in Catapilco, as the owner regularly sees Yaca there. The other nights I searched around road F760 SE of Quilpué and its tributaries, road E445 N of San Felipe (where I could finally wild camp easily) and Questa Chacabuco (above the tunnel on road 57). During these searches, I found possibly hundreds of **rabbits**, one fox and one or two more **Chinchilla Rats** - the one near E445 I photographed, the other at Chacabuco I did not, but am almost sure it was one. I also saw several small rodents with IR, but none of them had any tolerance for white light, so I did not get even a hint of an ID - I should have at least brought my red torch, which I didn't.



South-American Sea Lions



Culpeo