

Puma galore in Patagonia. May 8 - 18, 2025 (10.5 days in the field)



This is an illustrated report of my impressions of the Puma tracking tour in Patagonia, organized by www.wildlifewatchingexpeditions.com and guided by Mark Kaptein and Jillian Groeneveld, who own this small wildlife tour company located in the Netherlands. Mark and Jillian are two Dutchmen that both graduated in wildlife management and conservation, after which they pursued different career paths: Mark has been working in South Africa for many years, conducting research on carnivores, amongst others, and is also a fully licensed safari guide. Jillian is a self-employed ecological consultant working for Dutch municipalities. In the past few years, both established a fine reputation as the premier guides for Lynxes and Wolves in Poland and Estonia, working for well-known international nature tour companies. In 2023, they decided to gradually build up a portfolio of self-organized tours that focus on carnivores (in Poland, Estonia, Romania, Africa, Nepal and... Patagonia).

I first met them in early 2024 when they guided me and four co-participants during a tour in the Bieszczady forests in southeast Poland. I was much impressed with their knowledge, determination, tracking and spotting skills and good company. Needless to say, the Poland tour was very successful and most enjoyable. Crouching on my belly towards a Lynx and a Brown Bear was absolute fun and ensured an adrenaline rush I hardly ever experienced in any previous tour. When they mentioned a Puma tracking tour planned for early May 2025, I immediately signed-up.

The month of May was chosen on purpose: only a few tourists and much less wind. It turned out to be a very wise choice. Patagonian summers, while pleasantly mild, can also be frustrated by strong winds, as well as throngs of tourists. During our stay, the weather was rather benign; temperatures peaked at 12-13C and dropped to its lowest at some -5C in the end (at night). Only one day and night with strong winds and one day with some sleet rain. In the last few days, there had been some snowfall. Overall, nothing that bothered us much.

Accommodation was in Puerto Natales, which is some 1.5 hrs drive from the entrance of Torres del Paine NP. One might think that implies an inconvenient long drive each day, but in reality the Puma areas are much more interesting outside of the park. So, effectively we entered Puma country after a mere 45 minutes drive. Because the focus was on Pumas, we were out in the field from approx. 3-4PM to well after midnight (3-4AM). I enjoyed my breakfast in my room (biscuits bought in the supermarket and ample supply of Nespresso provided by the

accommodation). A lavish lunch/dinner was taken in town, where Mark and Jillian had found a nice selection of good restaurants.

Modus operandi for Puma tracking was to first scan and monitor by thermal scope for ID and behaviour. Only when observing behaviour of interest and potential for ensuing action, targeted spotlighting was used for photo and video opportunities. We brought blankets into the car, because of the open car windows to allow for thermal spotting. Despite the cold gusts of wind when driving, we usually managed to stay comfortable. I knew from past experience with them that whoever drives continues to use a thermal as well. So, two guides with thermals covering both sides at all times. All set to go.

During my 10.5 days in the field, we encountered no less than 35 Puma individuals (and probably more). As some of these were seen on more than one occasion, total Puma sightings well exceeded 100+. But it wasn't the numbers, it was the context in which many of these encounters took place. Imagine in pitch darkness in the field; suddenly the torchlights switch on and finding yourself surrounded by 4 or 5 Pumas and not all habituated to human presence... Almost every day I was privileged to witness a hunting attempt, albeit none was successful (their kill success rate is some 10%; we saw the other 90%...). Compare that to the experiences of a group of (very expensive) photographers that we witnessed standing for hours in front of a Puma family, dozing during the day, taking zillions of pictures and then leave the scene for drinks and dinner just minutes before it turned really interesting.

The following is not a day-to-day account. Instead, I intend to share my experiences by describing a few of the many exhilarating Puma encounters, illustrated by photos and links to videos, posted on YouTube.

Pre-tour extension to Chiloé Island

I decided to make the most of my stay in Chile and had booked a 4-day stay at the renowned Tepuhueico Lodge on Chiloé Island. Target species was the Kodkod and I did manage to see it, albeit it very briefly. The prior evening, a phone call had come from other guests who were outside the park and had spotted a Kodkod wandering about along the provincial highway. Martín, the owner, immediately fetched me and within minutes we were on the road speeding towards the location. When we arrived on the scene some 40 minutes later, the cat had disappeared. Next day, however, I was lucky. Close to the small bridge, a few hundred meters from the lodge, a melanistic Kodkod jumped across the road. It was only 3-4 seconds in view, but unmistakably a Kodkod. My 16th cat species. Next morning, we learned that the receptionist also saw a Kodkod, sitting rather relaxed, next to the same small bridge.

Fortunately, I had exceptionally good views of the Darwin's Fox and the Monito del Monte. And obviously, the Southern Pudu was present almost everywhere. A very satisfying introduction to Chile on a beautiful and diverse island and ... an exceptional lodge with a supreme quality of delicious food.





Pre-tour recce by Mark and Jillian



Mark and Jillian had arrived a week in advance to explore the region. Most of their time was spent outside the park and close to the Argentine border.

During their initial week they spotted some 13 Puma individuals; so, during *their* total 17 days in the field they accumulated sightings of at least 48 (sic!) Puma individuals. And... with some outstanding encounters, including a very recent Guanaco kill that got stuck in a fence during the hunt. It was killed by a female Puma, who had three cubs of some 6-8 months old to feed: have a look at the video footage made by Jillian:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1PsGd-PIZE>.

And if you're up to it, have a peep at the gory details of frenzied feeding the next day by a male Puma that seized the kill: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIDufhND-B4>.



All videos made by Mark and Jillian during the entire tour have been posted on their YouTube channel which I recommend to subscribe to as they are to add more highlights of past and future tours: <https://www.youtube.com/@WildlifeWatchingExpeditions>. As some sort of a teaser, they showed it to me when we met up on my day of arrival. My already high expectations immediately skyrocketed and during the days that followed I would not be disappointed.

Mother Puma in Mourning

On the very first day, we departed at around 3PM and soon after leaving town entered the surroundings of the park with its majestic scenery. First views of Andean Condor (one quite close to the road so that one could admire the gigantic size) and lots of Guanaco. We encountered a car parked next to the road with local friends of Mark & Jillian and who are naturalists.



A female Puma, known as Dania and very much at ease with human presence, was resting on a nearby hillock and very visible, once you knew where she was. Puma fur with its tinge of brown or grey blends well with the rocks and boulders. My very first Puma (and cat species # 17). Some 5 months ago, Dania had given birth to a litter of 3 cubs. One she lost shortly after, but the remaining two had survived until very recently. A week before my arrival, she had lost one to a male Puma and soon thereafter the last one was killed by a speeding car. It soon proved she had not yet been able to accept or absorb the fatal conclusion. After half an hour she went down the hillock, crossed the road and started searching for her lost cubs, sniffing here and there, but more impressively softly calling, looking left and right. While soft, it still carried a long way as we could sometimes hear the sound echoing from the nearby hills. When you watch the video I made and listen to her desperate calls, you may find it as heartbreaking as I did:

<https://youtu.be/b3DjayT1gAE>. At some point in time, while standing in the middle of the road, I was completely absorbed with my camera settings. Only when I heard Jillian standing some 30 meters away telling me the Puma was approaching, I started to notice she calmly crossed the road at some 3 to 4 meters from me. Apparently, the expression on my face was priceless. An awesome experience on one's very first day in Patagonia. But all rather 'classic', meaning this is what anyone else will also see on the first or second day and nothing compared to what was to come later...

The Kill and what happened in-between

During the afternoon, Mark and Jillian received a call from a local guide on a very fresh kill. We rushed to the scene and arrived half an hour later. The carcass of a subadult Guanaco was lying in a 3-feet deep rain ditch that ran parallel to the single lane highway. We parked the car some 30 meters away and waited. After a few minutes, a radio-collared female Puma appeared behind the fence and we soon noticed her cub of some 4 months close by. The mother - later identified as Nieves (Snow) - went down to the ditch and pulled the carcass some 20 meters further down and returned back behind the fence.



Then, the cub came into the open, rather uncertain and easily spooked. It took some courage before the cub finally entered the ditch and went for the neck, which was open from mom's strangling bite.



Mother came to join and started on the soft belly for the intestines. We could now see that she had a nasty open wound on her left thigh, possibly sustained during the actual kill.

As night set in, the cub took over and went for the juicy intestines.



We kept on watching the feeding and then noticed another Puma nearby, waiting as if an uninvited guest. The interloper circled around and then decided to withdraw by crossing the road.



Suddenly, at some 10 meters from where I and Jillian were standing, the Puma made a re-appearance and very keen on returning towards the rain ditch with the kill. It was a young adolescent male. Maybe from an earlier litter or otherwise related to mom. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for unrelated Pumas to share a kill by alternate feeding.



However, in this case there was a cub involved and a standoff started whereby the young adolescent sat down facing mom, who kept watching him, while her cub was safe behind her occasionally peeping its head above mom to evaluate the situation.

Once all had left the scene, it was decided to leave behind a camera trap and return before sunrise.

Next morning was a revelation. An attempt had been made to drag the Guanaco carcass over the fence into the bush behind it. However, in the process the carcass got stuck on the barbed wire. Nieves was now feasting on it and we witnessed the raw scene of an adult Puma tearing flesh from the kill right in front of us.



A few moments later we saw her trying to tear off the head of the Guanaco carcass, testifying to the Puma's strength.



Once Nieves had left, Mark and Jillian went to the ditch to retrieve the camera trap. An interesting video revealed what had happened during the night. A mature male Puma had arrived on the scene and the video showed how it chased off Nieves with a spectacular growl. Video footage on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E-O-tWmRrw> . It was likely the male that had moved the carcass out of the ditch, but got no further than the fence.

Encircled by a Puma pride

We stopped the car where a group of photographers with huge expensive camera lenses and tripods were assembled in the field. This was private property, but we were allowed to stay on the road and watched 4 Pumas resting: Petaka, her two subadult cubs and another adult female.

Later, the pride moved some 200 meters to the other side of a small hill that provided an excellent vantage point from where they could scan the slope below them. We moved our car to see if something was afoot. After an hour, a small herd of some 10 Guanacos entered the field from the opposite direction. The Pumas became alert but stayed put. We waited for what we hoped to turn into a chase and a kill... Late afternoon, the distinguished group of photographers then left for home.

We were waiting with 4 other cars, parked on the roadside and when dusk fell the last car had also left. A mere 5 minutes later, Jillian noticed activity amongst the Pumas. His thermal had meanwhile been linked up to my phone by Wifi. Using the thermal, we all watched the attack to unfold. It looked like a small pride of Lionesses,

but much faster. Once the Guanacos and Pumas were out of sight across the crest of the opposite hill, we got out of the car and quickly walked uphill following the road. As we crossed the crest, it became clear the attack had failed. Meanwhile, it had become pitch dark and assisted by the torch light we watched in awe how the Pumas restlessly wandered around us. It looked like an encirclement but it was sheer frustration on their part and



much to our delight. Some came as close as 2 meters, and often out of nowhere. What a thrill!!!

Mom with 4 Cubs



We then decided to return to the site of the kill near the single lane highway, which also happened to be on the way back to Puerto Natales. As we approached the site, we saw a new mother Puma with 4 (!!) cubs of 6-8 weeks old. Once outside the car, one cub left the scene. The mom leapt away, followed by the second cub, but the remaining two continued their feasting.

In the next 30 minutes a conundrum developed. A male Puma appeared, scattering the cubs away and again alternate between mom and male in the feasting. Mom finally disappeared with a large chunk of meat to feed the cubs that had disappeared in hiding elsewhere. We heard a growl. Mark went across the road. We went on



to search for Mom and found her with one of her cubs.

Mark and Jillian went to retrieve the camera trap that they had positioned left and right of the carcass on the barbed wire. Amazing footage of one of the small cubs standing waiting, then Mom appeared and chased away by the male:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeg7BtcVozU>.

Failed hunts

Arrived at scene of the same group of *de luxe* photographers of yesterday. At a distance of some 70 meters there was a stretch of rocks behind which the same 3 Pumas of yesterday were resting. It took their guide quite some time to lead the group to a better position so as to take another zillion of photos of Pumas lying and dozing. Late afternoon, the group decided to quit and walked down to their cars and left. At that precise moment, the Pumas rose and stared intently at a few Guanacos that had come into view. Some friendly Chilean tourists had joined us on the road from which we had a magnificent close-up view of a very likely hunt. We split up from the Chileans and noticed that a large Guanaco had appeared in-between the Pumas in the back and us on the road. The Guanaco made alarm calls and had its short tail raised out of anxiety. It was looking intently at the Chilean tourists, one of whom had decided to sit down while watching. That sitting position was exactly what spooked the Guanaco. As one of the Pumas had crouched forward towards its prey and ready to pounce, the Guanaco suddenly dashed away and the Pumas had to abort their planned ambush. All of this right in front of us, at some 50meters distance. This would have made a stellar show that one can only dream of. Alas.



We quickly moved to the other side of the hill crest waiting for the Pumas. At exactly the right spot they came over the crest, right towards us and passed us with quickening pace at a few meters from us. Again, another adrenaline surge. The small herd had moved away from us towards the crest of a hill at some 200 meters from us. The Pumas stalked and made short dashes forward when felt unnoticed. Both hunter and prey then disappeared out of our sight. The hunt must have failed because half an hour later, when dusk had set in, we

witnessed a similar hunting attempt at the same location. This time, the leading Puma ran at full speed towards the Guanacos for the ultimate chase. Alas, this time they again disappeared out of our sight. You can watch it on the videos made by Jillian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1cgs0ulwJA>

The ultimate Puma galore

With only one day left, we decided to enter the park towards its HQ at the end of the afternoon. While we had previously seen massive herds of Guanaco (in their thousands) close to the Argentine border, we were now treated with the ultimate view of an endless herd trotting down the crest of a hill with the majestic Cuernos del Pain peaks in the background. A truly awesome sight.



Soon after it was completely dark and absolutely silent.



A Puma was spotted and we got out of the car. There were more and before we knew it, we counted 5: mother Petaka and her two subadults, another female we had seen previously and named her Kinky Tail, and finally another unknown and heavily built female (later identified as Sol).

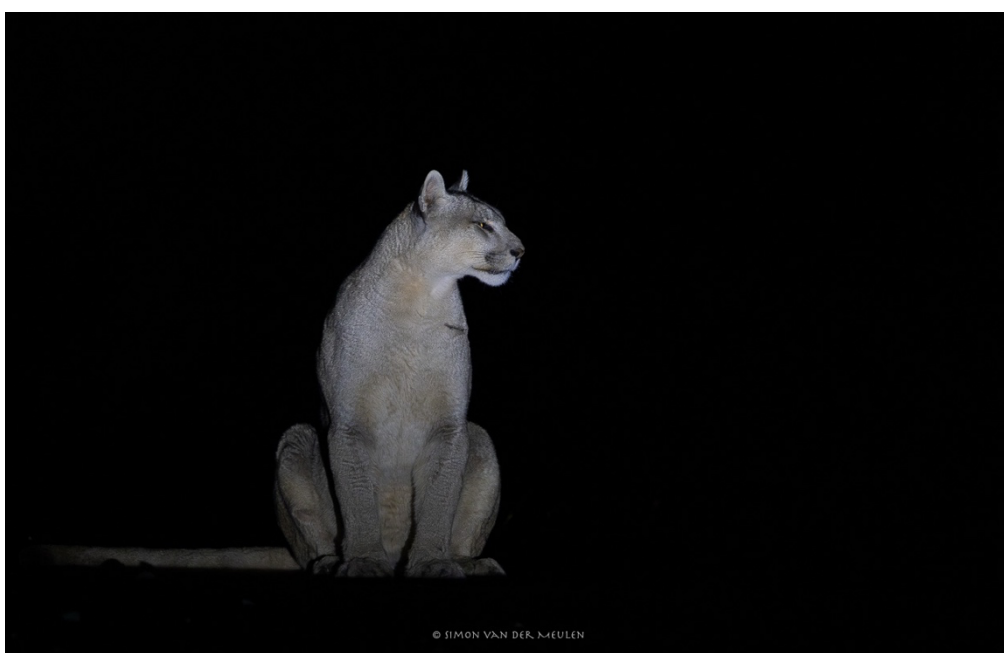


It turned out an extraordinary spectacle of Pumas left and right, not bothered by our presence as they were completely focussed on a small group of Guanacos out of our sight, but their alarm calls were not too distant. The Puma pride went after the Guanacos and right in front of us they hurried across the

road to the bushes from where the calls seem to originate. Alas, out of our sight and it soon became apparent that the Guanacos had a safe escape. The Pumas now returned and restlessly paced around us presenting us with spectacular photo opportunities.







At one point, I went on my knees for a low shot of Petaka who sat regally in the middle of the road. In the dead of night, I heard soft paws behind me and Sol slowly walked past me as if I did not exist, almost touching me.

Mammals seen

Chiloé Island private pre-tour extension:		
Southern Pudu	<i>Pudu puda</i>	50+
Monita del Monte	<i>Dromiciops gliroides</i>	1
Kodkod	<i>Leopardus guigna</i>	1
Darwin Fox	<i>Lycalopex fulvipes</i>	2
Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>	1

Chilean myotis	<i>Myotis chiloensis</i>	1
South American Sea Lion	<i>Otaria flavencens</i>	1
Patagonia tour:		
Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>	At least 35 individuals
Patagonian (Humboldt's) Skunk	<i>Conepatus humboldtii</i>	3
South American Gray Fox	<i>Lycalopex griseus</i>	40+
Culpeo Fox	<i>Lycalopex culpaeus</i>	3
Guanaco	<i>Lama guanicoe</i>	thousands
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	hundreds
Big hairy armadillo	<i>Chaetophractus villosus</i>	2