



Chiloé

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For the next installment in my ongoing series “rediscovering the southern cone as a mammalwatcher since I am here all the time anyway”, I have originally planned to spend some time in the mountains of the Los Lagos region, trying to find a more pleasant site for shrew opossum than the recently-possibly-discovered Puerto Blest (which is terribly expensive to reasonably access). However when I went through the reports on the plane, I noticed that everyone with a pulse goes to Chiloé and that had me intrigued enough to change my plans a bit. Ultimately, I ended up staying on Chiloé for 6 of my 7 available nights.

On the one hand, I quickly understood the appeal of Chiloé as a destination - it's simply beautiful. The experience there is akin to how I imagine visiting Finland on mushrooms would be: the post-glacial landscape is picture-perfect, it's just all the things biological that are ... wrong (including human-built structures). Thanks to the Andes conveniently not being in the way for once, Chiloé has some of the largest tracts of Patagonian wilderness that are actually easy to access. The ocean is extremely cold here - to the extent that I could feel the temperature gradient towards it - and this makes the climate much harsher than us northerners would ever expect at “just” 43 degrees of latitude. Considering how little land is there at this latitude in the southern hemisphere, the opportunity to experience this habitat is simply too tempting to pass.

On the other hand, after the week, I seriously struggle with understanding why Chiloé is so popular with mammalwatchers. Yes, Darwin's Fox is found only here and at one other small site outside of the island, Guíña is supposedly easiest here and Southern Pudús are kinda common - but besides this, there is essentially only Monito, 2-3 interesting cetaceans, and an apparently decreasing chance for either of the otters (and Coypu and Sea Lions if you really care...) - it just seems... poor in species?

And, at least for me, it was even poorer in individuals. I am not sure I have ever experienced a half-night walk with a thermal in hand, in pure wild nature, without seeing a single animal, but it happened to me on Chiloé... twice. Besides the Sea Lions, of which I saw a large colony, and the occasional flying bats that couldn't be IDed, these are the total numbers of individuals I have seen during 8 days (the first four species were lifers to me):

- 6 Southern Pudú
- 1 Southern Monito del Monte
- 1 Darwin's Fox
- 2-4 Chilean Dolphins
- 1 Peale's Dolphin
- 3 Chillas (on mainland)
- 1 rodent (presumably Black Rat, mainland)



Southern Pudú

at some point a worrying clanking sound in the undercarriage, which I didn't keep secret from the company. They cancelled the deposit without issue, but later wrote to me that their mechanic found a "serious hit" on the underside - at the time of writing I am not sure if this will evolve into an issue though. A lot of smaller roads on Chiloé are unpaved - somewhat surprisingly, the limiting factor for passing with a sedan was not clearance, but slope: some sections are too steep to climb without 4x4 and larger tires due to lack of traction. However renting a 4x4 to explore Chiloé of all places would feel a bit wasteful to me.

After an optimistic start with a couple of **South American Sea Lions** from the ferry, I headed to Tantauco, driving all the way to Lago Chaiguata on an unpaved road. The first 20 kms to the gate were straightforward, the remaining 18 less so, but still alright, just painfully slow - but it had my first **Southern Pudú**. After the typical Chilean long welcome, including all sorts of safety measures (which I then successfully ignored), I set up my camp for two nights as the only patron of the campsite and could explore the area freely. The rangers were not surprised about me wanting to walk around at night, but told me that flash photography was not allowed (do what you want with that information).

The entire central part of Tantauco suffered a major fire a couple decades ago and still hasn't recovered, thus a lot of the landscape is quite open. This looked like it could make mammalwatching easier, but maybe the animals avoid the open areas? The first night I walked the shorter trails south of the camp, finding absolutely nothing. The next day, inspired as usual by Rob Jansen's report, I did the 17-km circuit towards Lago Chaiguaco during the day, hoping for maybe otters. That was not an entirely brilliant idea, because it was surprisingly demanding - the terrain is muddy and rocky and the trails are nowhere near as flat as it looks from the contours on the map - so I was a bit tired afterwards, but I managed a couple hours out a night. I first went back towards Chaiguaco for a kilometer, because there was the best forest around, and then walked the access road - which had 3 more **Pudús**. On the way out, I hiked the shorter trails near the gate which go through some really good forest, but there is nowhere to stay nearby to practically access it at night, if you don't want to drive the long slog from/to the camp.

Continuing in Rob's footsteps, I went to Yaldad to look for dolphins. I found none near the port, but 1-2 **Chilean Dolphins** near Iglesia de Trincao at the southern tip of the landmass. Observing Chilean Dolphins was definitely

One could argue that I brought this on myself by skipping Tepuhueico, but even if you look at others' reports, the results often aren't that much better. What particularly strikes me is the consistent lack of small rodents. What do the predators even eat? Another funny aspect is the preponderance of road signs warning against collision with wildlife - most strikingly **Guíñas**, often in or near villages. I have seen zero roadkill though.

I rented a sedan in Puerto Montt from a local company. Despite having not noticed any impact on anything, the car developed



Southern Monito del Monte

not easy - they only showed the dorsal fins and only very irregularly, so it took me a while to notice them and getting even bad photos was a monstrous task.

In his report, Rob also mentions a “random forest road” and gives coordinates for its end, but not its beginning - and from the map it’s a bit unclear what road he took. I turned from Panamericana (yes I will call it that even on Chiloé, in my mind it simply ends in Quellón) just north of Lago Natri and this road was pretty good all the way to the southern shore of Lago Tepuhueico - and not much further from there, as the ensuing hill is quite steep. I drove it a bit in twilight and dark (1 **Pudú**) and I also walked a couple kilometers further (south from the lake), finding a **Southern Monito del Monte** in a bunch of thin trees at the edge of farmland. I wildcamped in an abandoned quarry by the road roughly where the climb from the lake starts and it was very quiet.

The next day I drove to the entrance of Tepuhueico and asked about nighttime access. The only accommodation inside the park is the lodge (which they didn’t even discuss with me, possibly just upon judging my wealth) and camping is strictly prohibited, but I could walk there if I was ready to check out at the gate by 8 pm (which is more than an hour before sunset). A congregation of three rangers, with more of those joining over radio, eventually came up with the idea that I could perhaps stay until 11 pm if I could call them that I am leaving alive so they wouldn’t have to go rescue me ... but at that point, I just realized I didn’t belong here, thoroughly thanked everyone and left searching for other interesting places to explore. (I’d like to note that Alexander F. Meyer kindly offered to help me arrange better access through his contacts with the owner, but I didn’t want to abuse his goodness when I didn’t really need it.)

In Cucao, PN Chiloé offers some short trails, daytime only. The internet - and even some of their wooden mapboards - show some longer trails, but the staff didn’t even hint about those after my inquiry. In the good old days, this would have been the end of my hopes, but nowadays the Rancho Grande trail is marked on both Google Maps and OSM, so the only actual problem was how to get to the trailhead. I have set camp in Tronco del Oro, a beautiful private campsite at a lakeside (again as the only tenant) and drove to 42.5797S, 74.1047W. From there, I still had to climb through two fences to get to 42.5781S, 74.0842W where a very faint path starts. Not far along it gets much bigger and soon reaches an actual trailhead with a map and information. How this place is meant to be accessed, I still don’t know and neither do I understand whether Conaf actually wants anyone to hike here, but nevertheless, I did. I walked up to about 450 meters a.s.l., on a trail that was essentially a creek (and occasionally a waterfall), waited for nightfall and then slowly searched, but again, found nothing.



South American Sea Lions



Chilean and Peale's Dolphins

After visiting Muelle de las Armas with its **Sea Lion** colony and thousands of seabirds - and a few hours of sitting under the Cucao bridge in vain hope of otters, I decided to attack the forests at the southern shore of

Lago Cucao. The track from 42.6794S, 73.9595W is way too steep for a sedan (I saw much bigger cars having a struggle), so I parked near the main road and set out on foot. I am not sure if I should be happy with the growing network of tracks clearly meant for logging of the forest, but since they were already there, I went all the way to 42.7189S, 73.9831W and back, which is not too far (12 km), but includes 700 meters of altitude gain. The area is clearly private, but I got talking with a guy who seemingly owned a large chunk and he was happy to have me hiking around.

Near the highest point (roughly 42.7039S, 73.9846W), I turned a curve and there was a fox standing in the middle of the track - a very dark fox, with a bushy tail and overall fluffier coat than any fox I ever saw in South America, clearly a **Darwin's Fox**. Sadly I didn't manage to take a photo before it took off into the bushes, but I could follow it for a while as it moved through the bushes making sneezing sounds that seemed like a judgement of my character to me. A side track a bit to the west had another Pudú. Both nights I also drove the road on the southern lakeshore (with ample guiña warnings) and repeatedly visited the Cucao otter bridge. Looking for guiñas here seems difficult though because of the high numbers of roaming domestic cats.

After another Rob-stop in Ensenada Pullao, where I saw again 1-2 **Chilean Dolphins** but also a **Peale's Dolphin** and a **Sea Lion** at the same time - it was time to finally go to Chepu, the only place on Chiloe I have already visited, an unbelievable fifteen years ago. Since that time, unfortunately Chepu Adventures seems to have closed down and thus I couldn't find any place to stay with a good view of the river - the only open campsite I found, which was a little further down the road, had a "mirador al rio", but it was too high and far for any practical viewing. I looked for otters from the main pier and from 42.0487S, 73.9593W (I just walked in and people passing me in a car smiled and waved, so I guess it was fine); the site mentioned by Rob was behind a gate and nobody was around to ask.

Arriving to Puñihuil, I managed to escape everyone trying to sell me a boat tour to see the penguins, paid a small fee and walked up to Muelle el Caleuche, from which I could nicely watch the penguins and the boats getting stupidly close to them, as well as a large beautiful area of coves and islets, a seemingly ideal habitat for Marine Otters.

Feeling essentially done with Chiloé (even having ticked off basically every feasible bird species that I was still missing), I wanted to do something on the mainland. But at this point, the car was getting noisy even on uneven tarmac, so I decided no more unpaved roads for the last night. I could hike somewhere into mountains, but the weather was, frankly, shit, so I came up with a compromise scenario, where I would drive to Las Cascadas on the eastern shore of Lago Llanquihue, camp there and explore the short trail to the waterfalls, as this is the area of one of the historical records of a shrew opossum. However after finding no reasonable place to stay (both camps were closed), I drove back to Ensenada and stayed in Camp Montaña, finding three foxes (all **Chillas** I guess) around the Laguna Verde park entrance. Then I just drove the tarmac roads at night - even the main roads to Cascadas and Petrohue were completely deserted after 10 pm and the road up towards the ski center was in surprisingly good condition, but all I found was yet another **Chilla**. During a short daytime walk around the coast SE of Puerto Montt, a rodent crossed the road, which, after seeing what is reported usually around, I suppose could just have been a **Black Rat**.

Hoping that the report wasn't too ornery and I'll see you in the next installment. Will I finally properly search for shrew opossum in Chile? Or will I investigate never before visited parts of central Argentina? The only way to find out is by following the series!



Chilla