

Argentina and Chile Mammal trip report:

This is a brief mammal trip report from a recent Argentina and Chile tour with a small group. The main targets of the trip, around which the itinerary was designed, were **Puma and Orca**. For this, we focused on two main areas: **Torres del Paine National Park in Chile** and **Peninsula Valdés in Chubut Province, Argentina**. Both are iconic bucket-list mammals and rank high on most naturalists' wish lists.

We also explored additional birding and mammal species throughout these regions. The trip was very successful, with four Puma sightings and two Orca sightings, including the famous beaching behaviour used when hunting South American sea lions.

General Lavalle Area – Pre-trip

As most of the group had been to Argentina before, we organised a short two-day pre-trip to the Pampas area of General Lavalle, about two hours southeast of Buenos Aires. We had a very small list of target birds and mammals and focused primarily on these, with everything else seen as a bonus.

We were picked up from the airport around 03:30 and made our way south, stopping for a quick breakfast and coffee. We soon reached our first location — a short dirt road just off the highway — and what a spectacular start it was.

Less than three minutes after heading down the gravel road, we saw a melanistic Geoffroy's Cat sitting in the middle of the road. While photographing it, we noticed it was focused on something at the roadside. Soon, our second major mammal target appeared: a Lesser Grison.

The two animals interacted, with the grison repeatedly approaching the cat, which became defensive and struck out at it. The grison largely ignored this and continued hunting Brazilian guinea pigs, which were nearby. A Pampas Fox was also seen in the area, adding to the excitement.

It soon got even better when our main bird target, a Hudson's Canastero, was seen close to the road.



Geoffroy's Cat

That afternoon, evening, and the following morning, we focused on a wetland area where Coypu were common along the roadside. Our main mammal target was the Crawling Swamp Rat, which we located using thermal scopes, giving excellent views. South American Painted-snipe were also seen using the same method.

Other mammals included Southern White-eared Opossum, European Hare, and Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk.

From a birding perspective, we found our main target, the Stripe-backed Bittern, with at least three individuals observed.

On the return journey to Buenos Aires, several short detours added interest to the drive, with a Yellow Pygmy Rice Rat the only new mammal recorded.

A memorable final evening was spent enjoying an excellent dinner in Buenos Aires before preparing for the flight the following morning.

Patagonia – El Calafate

We then flew to El Calafate, beginning the Patagonia section of the trip. After settling in, we targeted one of the most sought-after birds in South America: the Magellanic Plover. Despite it being late in the season, we eventually found a pair, giving excellent views.

An early morning exploration of the Patagonian steppe focused on its hardy mammal life, with notable sightings including Magellanic Tuco-tuco, Guanaco, Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk, South American Grey Fox, and Hairy-soled Mouse.

The drive toward the Chilean border continued to produce rewarding mammal sightings, with large numbers of Guanaco and a notable encounter with a Large Hairy Armadillo.

Following a smooth border crossing and hotel check-in, time was spent exploring a nearby lake and forest edge, adding to the sense of arrival in this diverse Patagonian landscape.



Large Hairy Armadillo



Guanaco

Torres del Paine – Pumas

The next few days focused on Puma tracking in Torres del Paine National Park. Alongside local Puma guides, we spent many hours searching known territories and waiting at confirmed sighting areas.

This is one of the most elusive big cats in the Americas, but Torres del Paine has become one of the best places in the world to observe them.

We recorded four separate sightings, including:

- A female with three cubs
- A female successfully hunting an Upland Goose
- Another female observed for over five hours

Other wildlife included South American Grey Fox and Culpeo Fox, with Guanaco present throughout as the main prey species.

Birding was secondary but still rewarding.



Puma



South American Grey Fox

Peninsula Valdés – Orcas

We then flew to Trelew and continued to Puerto Madryn. From here, we entered Peninsula Valdés, the highlight of the trip for marine mammals.

Our main objective was the Orca hunting behaviour, where orcas intentionally beach themselves to catch young South American sea lions before sliding back into the water.

We had multiple encounters:

- Orcas passing close to shore on calm observation days
- A spectacular beaching event with a large male observed hunting
- Another pod passing very close to shore

Other mammals included Patagonian Mara, European Hare, South American Grey Fox, Large Hairy Armadillo, Southern Mountain Cavy, and Guanaco.



Patagonian Mara



Orca

Summary

Overall, this was an extremely successful trip with all major targets achieved. It is an ideal itinerary for naturalists seeking Puma, Orca, and the highlights of Patagonia in a single journey. Extensions to Ushuaia or northern Chile can easily be arranged.