

CHILE 2011 (2 trips: February 25 to March 25 and November 15 to December 21)

In February-March I went to Chile specially for mammalwatching. As I got very bad weather on Chiloe island I decided to come back in November-December. Both times I travelled by public transport, hiring car only in Antofagasta, Punta Arenas, Chiloe Island and Temuco.

Here follows the sites visited:

Pan de Azucar national park(02/2011): this site is good for marine birds and a few mammals. You need to go on a boat trip, easy to share with other peoples. I saw 2 South Marine Otters (including 1 from the shore), at least 30 South American Sea Lions.

Mejillones: Situated north of Antofagasta, it is one of the rare places where to see South American Fur seals in Chile. There is a colony at the tip of the peninsula, but you need a 4x4 or to hire a boat. As it was expensive and I had already seen this species I didn't go. From the shore I saw around 60 South American Sea Lions in March and a few in November.

Antofagasta: Sea lions were common on both trips.

Laguna Menique and Laguna Miscanti (November): 18 Vicuñas. This 2 lakes are accessible from San Pedro de Atacama. You can go there on a tour or by car (even a sedan car). I recommend this option. In the past the tours were a cheap and interesting way to see the scenery and the wildlife. Now is a little at a factory. Rushing!!! A waste of time and of money.

Laguna Verde and Laguna Blanca (Bolivia): These 2 sites are more easily accessible from San Pedro de Atacama, but you need a 4X4. Same remark as above, but I saw at least 80 Vicuñas.

La Campana national park (November): access easy by public transport. I saw twice a Culpeo by day light and 2 Fence Degus.

Punta Choros reserve. I think the best place to see Marine Otter. They are common. You can see them on a boat tour around the island or even easier from the shore, including from the campings. In November I saw 3 the 20th, 5 the 21st(including 1 at the island). I saw also South American Sea lions on both trips (at least 30 in november), plus 1 Juan Fernandez fur seal in march (I was told there are now 1 or 2 between January and March). But I was unable to say if it was a Juan Fernandez or a South American Fur Seal. In March I got also 4 Bottle Nosed Dolphins and 10 Guanacos.

Chiloe island: I spent 5 days in march. I drove to many places by night to look for Darwin's fox, Pudu and Kokhod. I saw only fox footprints north of Castro. I got a lot of rain and was unable to reach Tantauco national park because of the rain. Same, the road to Tepuhueco was closed because of the bad state of the bridge. I tried to book accommodation. First they answered me. Then it was the black out. Apparently the lodge was closed in November and December. Nevertheless I got plenty of informations where to look for the fox. If you camp in the park they are attracted by your food. Even anglers see it as they camp. There was also one used to stay below the house of fishermen at Ahuenco (not far from Chepu). On the website I read they are present in Tantauco. So in December I first hiked from Chepu to Ahuenco, camped there 2 nights, putting some fish to try to attract one. I saw a few scats, but there was also a feral dog (normally forbidden in the park) which came apparently to eat the food (footprints). After I went to the northern part of Tantauco where I slept 2 nights. The first day I saw only 1 fox scats and the second day several fresh footprints. But no foxes by day or by night. Some rangers say it is very rare, others say the contrary. But I was lead to the house of the staff and they showed me photos of a Fox which came in their house by 10 pm 3 weeks ago. It seemed very stressed, and they never saw it again. After that I went to Angol and Parc Nahuelbuta on the continent (apparently the only place where Darwin's fox is known outside Chiloe). According to the ranger at the gate, there was one used to come at a carpark where there is some rubbish bins. I slept 2 nights there and saw only 1 Grey fox. I also tried to drive by night but saw only owls. No Kodkhod but I had seen 1 a few years earlier in the center of the island. It was hunting rodents on the road.

Then I left to Santiago de Chile, in order to catch the day after a flight to Punta Arenas. But we were stopped because of a volcanic eruption and we flew back to Santiago.

In order not to lose my last days I went back to Puerto Montt with a night bus, hired a 4x4 (not necessary now- the road is better than in the past) and drove back to Tantauco. After a lot o searching day and night I found a trail with a lot of fox scats and the smell of urine. The fox was not far, but I didn't see any (middle of the day). I went back on the same trail by the end of the day and finally when I came back I got a Darwin's a few meters in front of me. What a day. It took me a lot of time. But finally I got it!