

Chile

Justin Brown

November 18th-December 2nd

I spent ten days searching for Andean mountain cats with David Couve of Far South Expeditions in Lauca National Park in Chile. On most days, we went spotlighting from 4:30 am until 6:30 am, and then again from 8:30 pm until 1:30 am; from noon until 8:30 pm, we did a combination of walking and listening for viscacha alarm calls.

Spotlighting yielded very few animals aside from vicuñas and viscachas, with a culpeo or two being the norm. We did find a colocolo during one spotlighting session, and I was able to jump out of the car and get a good look at it from a distance of about 15 feet before it sprinted away. The mountain cat is extremely difficult to find, but we had a magical encounter toward the end of the trip.

We were spotlighting on foot and David got some eyeshine on top of a ridge. I used my camcorder to zoom in on the animal and could tell right away it was a cat. I told David that we had to find a way to get to the top for a better view of the cat. We hurried up the gentlest incline in our vicinity, both of us determined not to miss this opportunity despite the burning in our lungs. Upon reaching the top, David quickly found the cat, and it turned out to be two cats. They were darting in and out of cracks or crevices in the rocks right at the edge of the ridge, within just a few feet of where we were standing. They didn't seem afraid--cautious but not afraid--because they could have easily escaped us along the ridge. I think they, especially the smaller, presumably younger cat, were curious and also didn't want to leave a freshly-killed viscacha that we had found during all of the commotion. At one point, I watched the smaller cat run into

a crevice, and I stood back for a few moments to see if it would come out. It didn't come out, so I walked over and there it was, tucked in the crevice and just looking at me! It was literally right at my feet. It looked at me briefly and then disappeared deeper into the crevice. I stood back again with my camcorder ready and it emerged with a mouse in its mouth after maybe 30 seconds. I got a short video as it came out, which you can see [here](#), and the features and markings are undeniably those of an Andean mountain cat. The other cat went into a crevice and just completely vanished. David shined his light inside while trying not to fall off the cliff, but the cat wasn't there. We think there was more than one exit point for that crevice. In any case, the whole experience was unreal. I really recommend David if you're interested in doing a trip for Andean mountain cat. He's such a nice person, and so passionate about

wildlife, and so willing to grind and grind to
find the cat.