



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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PATAGONIA (CHILE AND ARGENTINA)

Date - March 2013

Duration - 32 Days

Destinations

Santiago - Puerto Montt - Chiloe Island - Pumalin Park - Punta Arenas - Strait of Magellan - Magdalena Island - Francisco Coloane Marine Park - Carlos III Island - Torres Del Paine National Park - El Calafate - Los Glaciares National Park - Perito Moreno Glacier - Lake Argentino - Lake Viedma - Mount Fitz Roy - Gaiman - Rawson - Punta Tombo - Puerto Madryn - Valdes Peninsula - Puerto Piramides - Punta Norte - Buenos Aires

Trip Overview

A multipurpose trip, as I wanted to try two new guides and a whale watching tour in Chile, as well as a new operator for the Valdes Peninsula in Argentina. I also spent time photographing puma at Torres Del Paine with my normal guide there and visited Los Glaciares National Park, primarily to photograph some of the stunning landscapes. After an internal flight from Santiago and a ferry from Puerto Montt, on which I saw the first of many South American sea lions, my trip started in earnest at Chiloe Island. After a mixed visit in 2011, I had arranged to spend time with a guide I had been in contact with for a while, primarily to research a couple of new areas for darwin's fox, given that the Tepuhueico Lodge is no longer reliable. I also intended to explore the possibility of putting

a few destinations in place to look for kodkod, a small and generally elusive cat which can only be found in certain parts of Chile and across the border in some limited areas of Argentina. I decided to spend the first couple of days around Puniuil and Chepu to check the latest situation regarding marine otter, southern river otter and coypu sightings. Although I was pleased to see all three animals fairly easily again, with hindsight this was a mistake, as the weather deteriorated after the first two days and most of my time spent searching for darwin's fox was in torrential rain. I had excellent views of the marine otters on the coast, as they are completely relaxed around boats and spend much of their time eating crabs on buoys or rocks in the bay. The coypu sightings were also fairly good, but on this occasion I encountered just one river otter and only



briefly. I had the option of looking again the next day, but I was satisfied that these rare otters, they are only found in Patagonia and are now classified as endangered, remained accessible and did not want to lose one of the days that I had reserved to look for darwin's fox. The main site visited for the fox is the one that I will almost certainly use in future, as it involved a pleasant three-hour hike to a remote area on the west coast of the island and as soon as I arrived a fisherman informed us that he had seen a fox earlier that morning. Indeed, I immediately found a great deal of scat in the area and the remains of a seagull that the elusive canid had clearly eaten just a few hours prior to our arrival. Unfortunately, at this point the heavens opened and the rain barely stopped for the next seven days. Of course we continued to search, but visibility was considerably reduced in the heavy rain and the fox did not make an appearance. This was a great shame, as I believe that two or three days in this area, in even average conditions, would almost guarantee a sighting and all of the locals that I spoke to confirmed this. Although we briefly tried another couple of possible locations, including one that is also good for coypu, kodkod and southern pudu, the smallest deer species in the world, the weather did not



improve and searching for animals, successfully at least, was more or less impossible, particularly given the time constraints that the initial failure had now placed on us. One consolation was my guide, who was first class and when I return to Chiloe I will devote several days to exploring that one area with him and will also make a more determined effort to search for kodkod. On a more positive note, I spotted a pod of Chilean dolphins just before we were about to leave the island and we enjoyed nice views of them for about twenty minutes. That was about as positive as things would get for the next few days, as I was due to visit Pumalin Park from Chiloe, but the rain was relentless throughout the duration of my short stay and my camera spent almost the entire visit safely packed away in the dry. It was not required a great deal in

any case, as the only major wildlife encountered during this entire section of the tour was a colony of sea lions from a boat that I had chartered to reach the park and a rather bedraggled pudu on yet another hike in the rain. Although it is difficult at the time, you just have to be philosophical about these setbacks, as I had visited these areas at the same time of year previously with almost no rain and the trip dates had been organised specifically to coincide with the optimum killer whale viewing period at the Valdes Peninsula. I still tried to make the most of my time at Pumalin, as it is an extremely scenic park with a great deal of wildlife and a number of superb hikes across an outstanding landscape. It is also an important reserve in many ways, as it is owned by the Conservation Land Trust, an organisation created by Douglas Tompkins, which administers and protects huge areas of fragile wilderness across both Chile and Argentina. I obviously did not see it at its best on this occasion, but I will certainly return and thankfully, both the weather and my fortunes, the two of which had been inextricably linked for over a week, were about to improve considerably. That did not appear to be the case when I landed at Punta Arenas and it was still raining, but fortunately it cleared within an hour and I only experienced a

couple of further showers during the remainder of the trip. I had less than a full day spare at Punta Arenas and used it to visit the magellanic penguin breeding colony at Magdalena Island and to circumnavigate the small colony of sea lions at the adjacent Marta Island. My luck was obviously beginning to improve, as the weather was set fair and we also came across small pods of both peale's and commerson's dolphin. The next four days were spent on a humpback whale watching tour that had been recommended to me by a local guide and which provided one of the highlights of the entire tour. The first part of the trip involved a speedboat transfer along



the Strait of Magellan to Cape San Isidro, where we spent one night before proceeding the next morning on a larger boat to Carlos III Island within the Francisco Coloane Marine Park. The waters around Carlos III Island are a popular feeding ground for humpback whales and the question was not whether we would see them, but how well. For the majority of the trip the answer appeared to be moderately, as we saw a lot of whales, as well as peale's dolphins, sea lions and South

American fur seals, but not any really close to the boat. The ones that were reasonably close, would fluke and then disappear and we had not had that spectacular sighting that everyone was hoping for. The trip was still enjoyable though, as the scenery was ravishing and when we were not looking at animals our attention was easily diverted by the impressive landscapes, including the attractive Santa Ines Glacier. It was on the way back from the glacier, that we saw a young female humpback breaching in the distance. She was a long way off and we all assumed that she would disappear before we reached her. However, as we approached, our guide was able to identify the distinctive markings of her flukes and there was no sign of her leaving. Indeed, her activity increased as we got closer

and closer until eventually we were sitting within about 30 metres of this majestic creature. What followed was just about the greatest display I have ever witnessed from a whale, as she proceeded to breach, roll and slap her flippers against the surface of the water for well over an hour. At several points she just kept breaching, one sensational jump after another, each creating a thunderous crash as she soared from the water and plunged into the depths below. I had no idea what caused such passion, and neither did the scientists on board, but it looked joyful to me, as if she was simply happy to be alive and was celebrating the fact in the only way that she knew. We eventually had to leave, albeit



reluctantly, as we still had a long way to go and were losing the light. She was still jumping as we pulled away and my last sight of her was in mid-air, gloriously bathed in the last light of the day. It was a truly magical experience and one that I will never forget. Fortunately, it was not to be the last memorable encounter of the trip, as my next destination was Torres Del Paine National Park, one of my favourite places in South America and the easiest location to find pumas on the planet. There is of course a lot more to Paine than the resident pumas, although I have to admit that I am a total sucker for these sublime cats and they are always the main attraction for me. I had almost a week available to explore the breathtaking scenery and search for a limited, but impressive collection of wildlife in the excellent company of my irreplaceable local, who has lived in the park for well over twenty years and generally knows exactly where to find each of the pumas he has watched grow up. I started with pumas of course and by the end of the first afternoon I had seen five, a mother with three juveniles and one solitary female, which my guide told me had two very young cubs, that we would definitely see at some stage. We did the next day, but not as either of us expected, as we had spent a few hours quietly watching the same lone female when we decided to take a break. We slowly left our position to avoid disturbing her and began the walk back through an area of long grass. As we did so, there was a sudden commotion and two puma cubs dashed out of the grass and bolted directly past us, although interestingly, they did not run in the direction of their mother. We chose not to follow, to avoid exacerbating an already unfortunate situation and we both knew that the cubs would join their mother again around dusk. Just to confirm, we went back later that afternoon and were soon watching the youngsters playing together boisterously before their mother



eventually sauntered over from where she had been sleeping for most of the afternoon. Over the next few days we spent a lot of time watching this wonderful family, as the mother was extremely tolerant of our presence and at one stage the two of us were sitting no more than ten metres from her. We made a point of not going that close to the cubs, but still had great views and noticed that one had been born with no tail. So, for future reference, if you are ever in Torres Del Paine and come across a puma with no tail, the chances are it was born in early 2013. Including the three juveniles and two cubs, I saw eleven pumas on this visit, but only ten of them were with my guide, as we split up to search an area early one morning and, as I walked over the brow of a hill, a puma did the same from the other direction and we ended up

staring at each other at the top. Although I have been alone with pumas on foot on several occasions, and they are rarely aggressive unless threatened, there is always that few seconds of doubt and I must admit that my pulse quickened just a little. It certainly concentrates the mind, standing within perhaps a short burst of speed and graceful pounce of something that can kill you without

breaking stride, but this puma was far more nervous of me, with good reason given our continued persecution of the species, and immediately turned on its heels and disappeared from whence it had come. I managed to get a quick picture as it turned towards the bottom of the hill and when I showed my guide, he told me that it was almost certainly the father of the cubs we had been watching. Given our success with my favourite cat, I did not spend a great deal of time looking for other animals at Paine, but still enjoyed some excellent sightings, many of them at close range. Guanaco, a member of the llama family and the puma's main food source, appeared to be even more abundant than usual and chilla, or South American grey fox, were commonly encountered around the rangers quarters and elsewhere in the park. Culpeo, the other fox species in the area, were more difficult to find, but I eventually caught up with a female scavenging near one of the picnic sites. Sadly, my guide informed me that a puma had killed her entire litter that year. Perhaps as a result of the devastating fire in late 2011, which probably drove large numbers out of the park, Patagonian huemul are becoming increasingly hard to find and I only had a brief glimpse of one in the distance on the side of a hill. I enjoyed a great deal more success with humboldt's hog-nosed skunk, as we saw several and were able to approach to within a metre of one on foot. In addition to a lone pichi, a small species of armadillo, European



hares were routinely observed whilst spotlighting each evening. I think that I probably also saw a geoffroy's cat, as I had a quick glimpse of a small cat in the spotlight one night, but it ran into the undergrowth and no amount of searching on foot could locate it. The only alternative had to be pampas cat, but my guide said these were very rare and he knew that geoffroy's cat had been seen in the vicinity previously. Nevertheless, I have not included it on my list of mammals, as we could not identify it with complete certainty. Andean condor were another highlight and, as is generally the case here, most of the wildlife was photographed against a magnificent backdrop of dramatic mountains and glorious turquoise lakes. From the outstanding landscapes of Torres Del Paine, I crossed the border into Argentina and encountered more of the same in Los Glaciares National Park. Although guanaco, hare and



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condor were all seen at various times, as well as a pair of culpeo foxes on one of the drives, this short section of the trip had not been designed with wildlife in mind and instead I had fun exploring and attempting to capture the essence of some of the astounding scenery. I am sure that there must be equally gorgeous destinations on earth, but when you are photographing the Perito Moreno Glacier one day and move to Mount Fitz Roy the next, having already been in Paine, it is very hard to imagine that anywhere can rival Patagonia for sheer majesty.



Ideally I would have had longer at Los Glaciares to do it justice, but I wanted to devote the remaining time to the final section of my trip, the wildlife of the Valdes Peninsula and surrounding areas. I was using a new operator for this region and could tell almost immediately that the guide I had been given was excellent, as he had a great knowledge of the animals we were going to look for and began the tour by taking me to a small colony of southern mountain viscacha, which are living in the most easterly extreme of their range. I was not even aware they existed here and we had the added bonus of also finding a pair of Patagonian cavy, or mara as I have always known them. An auspicious start and our success continued when we went on a boat tour at Rawson to look for commerson's dolphin, a diminutive and highly distinctive black and white dolphin that the area is known for. There were a number of sea lions around the dock before we departed and once out at sea we found the dolphins easily and proceeded to watch these tiny creatures produce the type of performance that only dolphins can. It was one of those situations where you do not know in which direction to look, as dolphins jumped acrobatically on either side of the boat and others rode the wake at the front and back of the vessel simultaneously. It was a wonderful first day and the next morning we visited the magellanic penguin colony at Punta Tombo, where around half a million penguins share the dunes and sparse vegetation with a number of guanaco and a multitude of southern mountain cavy, a type



of guinea pig. The combination of unusual and contrasting animals can produce some unique photographs and we spent a couple of hours watching the three species, all of whom appear completely oblivious to each other. We would have probably stayed longer, but were due to drive to the Valdes Peninsula later that morning and I was very keen to start the final stage of my trip and begin looking for killer whales. Of course, I was not simply hoping to see killer whales in the water, as the Valdes Peninsula is the area where the world first witnessed the extraordinary sight of killer whales stranding themselves on the beach in order to hunt sea lion pups. The entire tour had been planned around this one event, as the orcas attack seasonally when the sea lions give birth and my visit had been timed to coincide with the main attack period. Fortunately, given the other interesting species found on the peninsula, the killer whales make their assaults an hour or two either side of high

tide, which allowed us to dedicate a set part of each day to the orca vigil and still have plenty of time available to explore plenty of other productive wildlife areas. I always knew that we would arrive too late on our first day to make high tide, but I remained eager to reach the main public viewing decks at Punta Norte and to start searching along the coast for orca pods hunting in a more conventional manner. We did not see any on that first day and instead spent time watching sea lions and a few southern elephant seals relaxing on the beach, blissfully unaware that they were not even safe beyond the water. Over the course of the next few days we had great success in terms of seeing killer whales, but did not actually witness an attack, that event apparently occurred within a few hours of me boarding the flight home. I was in good company, as a BBC film crew were in the area testing a new type of flying camera and they departed the day before I did. My compensation, however, was a superb one, for instead of watching a killer whale grab a young seal and depart, I had the immense privilege of observing a mother teaching her offspring the technique of hunting up on the beach. In order to instruct her calf, the female beached herself slightly on a number of occasions and the young orca followed for as far it dared



before stopping and letting its mother complete the process. Although there were sea lions on the shore, none were within reach and this was clearly a training exercise with a mother passing on her knowledge to the next generation. In terms of witnessing intimate natural behaviour, it was absolutely riveting and I was not at all disappointed that I had failed to see an attack on this occasion, as my aim has never been to watch sea lion pups being killed, although this has occurred, but to appreciate the incredible spectacle of these immense creatures partially stranding themselves in order to feed. This was even better in some ways, as this mother had nothing to gain from her fairly risky endeavours, not even a meal, and was doing this purely to ensure that her young was equipped to fend for itself. It was a marvellous experience and we enjoyed several more at Valdes, including an incredibly rare encounter with three Patagonian weasels, which, according to most experts at least, are actually meant to be extinct in this region. Unfortunately, I was not



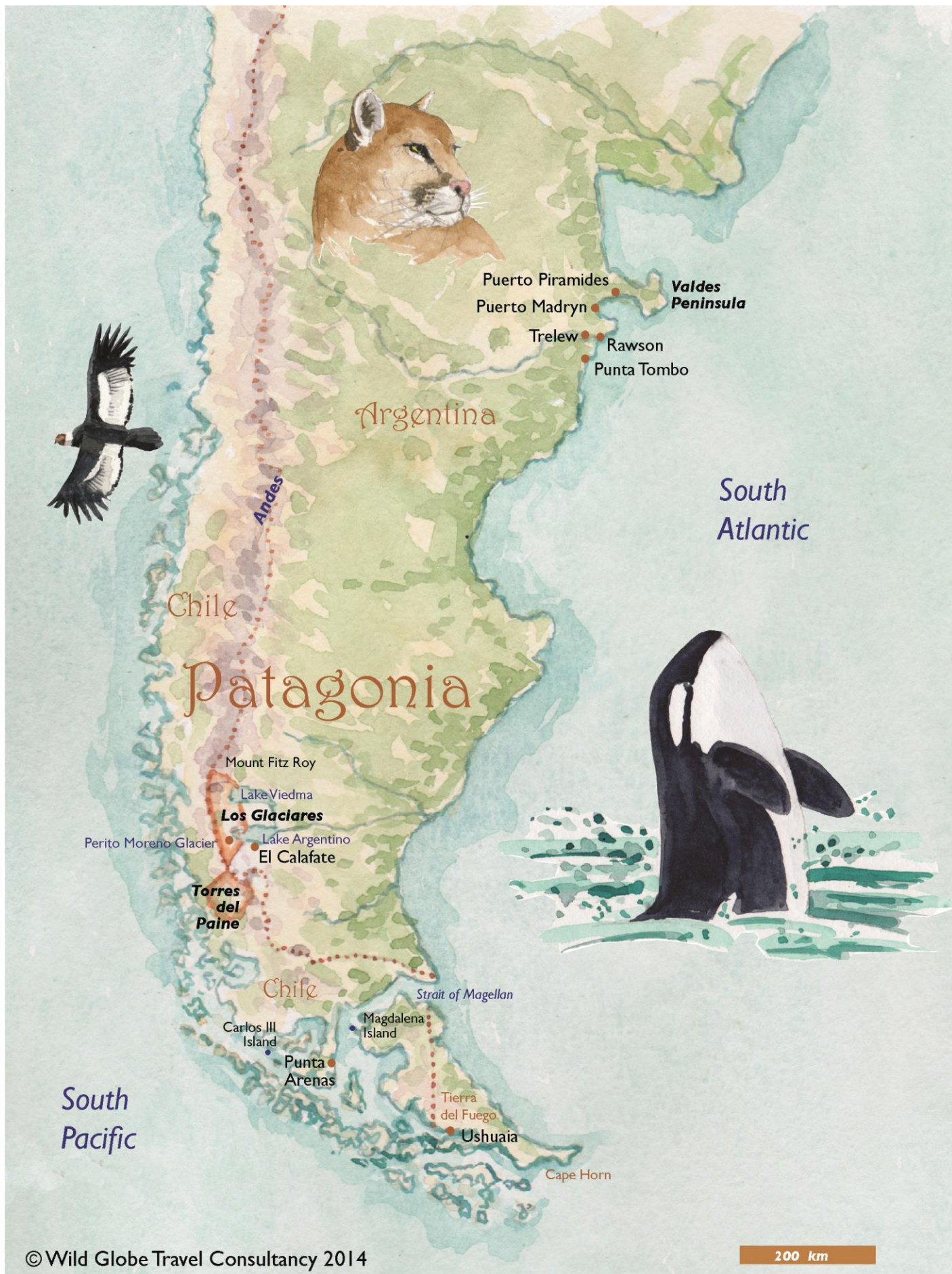
able to get a photograph, as we were driving when we saw them at the side of the road and by the time we had pulled over, they had disappeared. However, we photographed their den, complete with fresh urine trails, and even collected a sample of their scat, which my guide has since passed on to researchers studying the biodiversity of the peninsular. Other sightings included numerous large hairy armadillos, two humboldt's hog-nosed skunks, several pairs of Patagonian cavy, a chilla being chased away by a lesser rhea, a South American fur seal swimming with a group of sea lions and a large colony of southern elephant seals. We also visited Puerto Madryn for an afternoon and spent an enthralling hour watching a feeding group of around 300 dusky dolphins, somersaulting spectacularly all around our boat. It was a fitting climax to a wonderful trip and the appalling weather at Chiloe was but a distant memory.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>	Eleven different cats, including two cubs, at Paine.
2	South American Grey Fox	<i>Pseudalopex griseus</i>	Individuals at Paine, Calafate and Valdes.
3	Culpeo	<i>Pseudalopex culpaeus</i>	Two individuals at Paine.
4	Humboldt's Hog-nosed Skunk	<i>Conepatus humboldtii</i>	Several at Paine and two at Valdes.
5	Marine Otter	<i>Lontra felina</i>	Eight to ten at Puniuil, including on land.
6	Southern River Otter	<i>Lontra provocax</i>	One seen on the Puntra River on Chiloe.
7	Patagonian Weasel	<i>Lyncodon patagonicus</i>	Three at the edge of the road in the Valdes Peninsula.
8	Patagonian Huemul	<i>Hippocamelus bisulcus</i>	One on the side of a hill at distance in Paine.
9	Southern Pudu	<i>Pudu puda</i>	One on a walk along the river at Pumalin Park.
10	Guanaco	<i>Lama guanicoe</i>	Numerous at every destination excluding Chiloe.
11	Large Hairy Armadillo	<i>Chaetophractus villosus</i>	Numerous sightings at the Valdes Peninsula.
12	Pichi	<i>Zaedyus pichiy</i>	One briefly in Paine.
13	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Abundant at Paine and several in Los Glaciares.
14	Southern Mountain Viscacha	<i>Lagidium viscacia</i>	Small colony near Gaiman.
15	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>	Maybe six on the Puntra River on Chiloe.
16	Patagonian Cavy	<i>Dolichotis patagonum</i>	One pair near Gaiman and several at Valdes.
17	Southern Mountain Cavy	<i>Microcavia australis</i>	Abundant at the magellanic penguin colony at Punta Tombo.
18	Brazilian Guinea Pig	<i>Cavia aperea</i>	Two at the Costanera Sur reserve in Buenos Aires.
19	South American Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus australis</i>	Several on the whale watching trip, one at Valdes.
20	South American Sea Lion	<i>Otaria flavescens</i>	Common in all coastal areas.
21	Southern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>	Large colony on the Valdes Peninsula.
22	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Eight on the whale trip.
23	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	At least thirteen at the Valdes Peninsula.
24	Peale's Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus australis</i>	Small group on the boat tour to Magdalena Island.
25	Chilean Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus eutropia</i>	Small group seen off Chiloe Island.
26	Dusky Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obscurus</i>	300 plus seen off Puerto Madryn.
27	Commerson's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>	On the boat trip to Magdalena Island and at Rawson.









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