Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.
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PARAGUAY, ARGENTINA AND BRAZIL

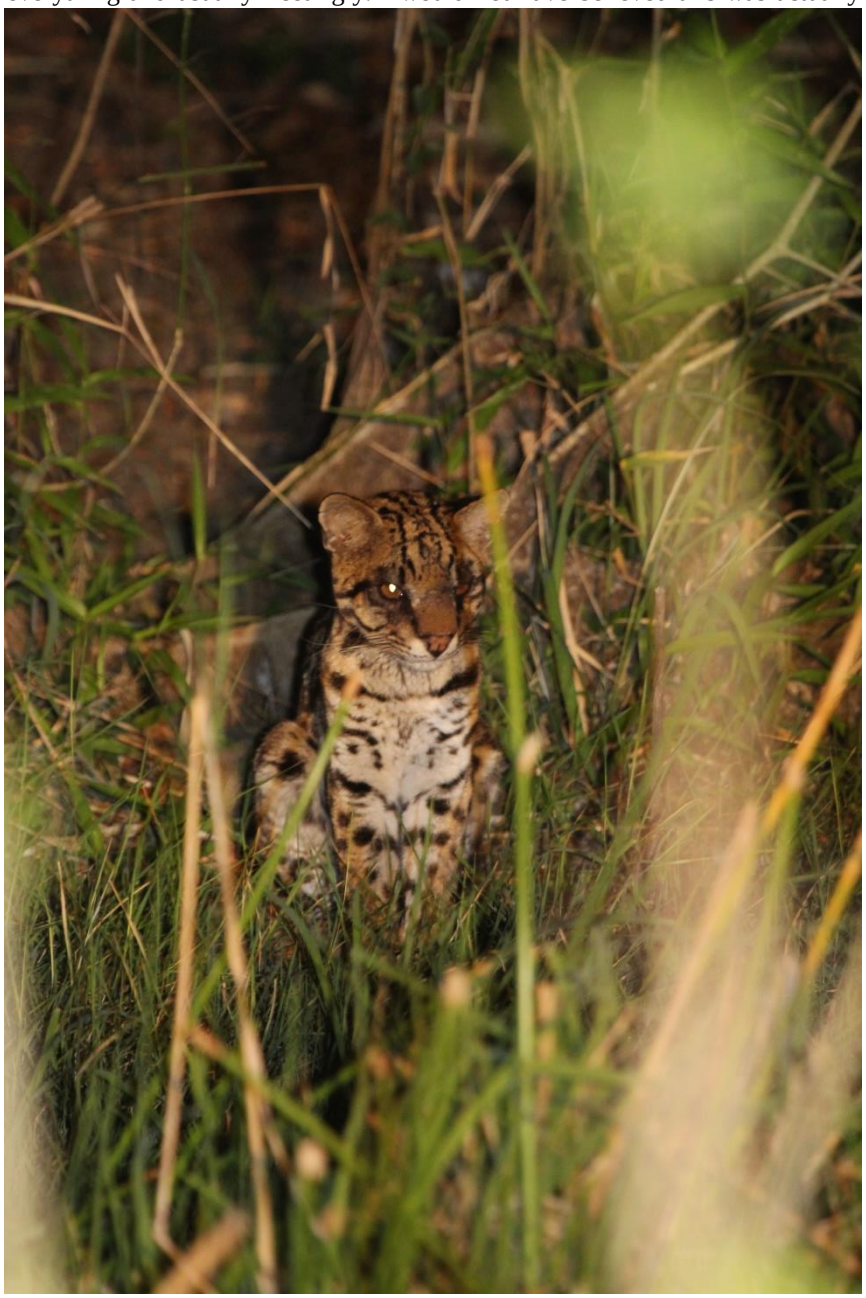
Date - July 2015

Duration - 34 Days

Destinations
Asuncion - Pirahu - Laguna Capitan - Loma Plata - Fortin Toledo - Mariscal Estigarribia - PN Medanos del Chaco - PN Teniente Enciso - Laguna Salada - Bahia Negra - Los Tres Gigantes Biological Station - PN Defensores del Chaco - Cerro Leon - Encarnacion - Coronel Bogado - Capitan Miranda - Ibera Wetlands - Ibera Provincial Reserve - Colonia Carlos Pellegrini - Ciudad del Este - Iguazu National Park - Iguazu Falls - Mbaracayu Forest Nature Reserve - Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca

Trip Overview

Of the various tours that I have been working on over the last year or so, this was the one that I was most looking forward to and suspected would probably be the most successful, as Paraguay is a superb wildlife destination and I had almost five weeks to explore some of the very best areas in South America, including the Gran Chaco and Pantanal. Sadly, my trip was the exception that I believe proves the rule to some degree, as I experienced the most frustrating and consequently disappointing tour that I have personally been involved with and yet we were still able to view a variety of rare creatures that would suggest the opposite was the case. A list including puma, jaguarundi, geoffroy's cat, ocelot, maned wolf, tapir, lesser grison and tayra would be the envy of many tours, but I have always maintained that great wildlife trips are as much about how you encounter animals as what you actually see and the vast majority of our sightings were unequivocally poor. Whilst our final mammal list certainly looks impressive, the reality is that during the first three weeks of the trip, which was really the main wildlife section in the best regions, we saw one or occasionally two of everything and usually fleetingly. I would not have believed this was actually possible prior to this tour, but our eight sightings of



southern tamandua, giant river otter, jaguarundi, lesser grison, tayra, Chacoan peccary, white-lipped peccary and collared peccary, seven of which were crossing roads, lasted a combined total of less than 20 seconds. A few encounters were far better of course, and we did manage a second distant view of a jaguarundi at night, but just as many were similarly depressing and the situation ultimately became so exasperating, that I would have eventually swapped pretty much all of those transitory glimpses for a calm ten minutes with any one of the more elusive animals. Given what we did eventually see and the evident vagaries of general wildlife watching, the situation is usually very different when an expedition has been planned around one specific target species, my comments may sound slightly churlish, as I am the first to acknowledge that you can never guarantee what you will see or how you will see it when you are dealing with totally wild animals, particularly in remote regions where they may not be used to people. I have explained this concept to guests on more occasions than I can recall and although I am well versed in these principles, and am generally extremely patient in the field, equally, I have never experienced such an unsuccessful or ill-fated run. Despite a few fairly defensive and laboured explanations, which were all entirely unnecessary given that he was not responsible for our misfortune, nor had our guide and before the tour commenced he had informed us that of the eight cat species we could hope to find, geoffroy's cat, jaguarundi, ocelot, puma and jaguar were the most likely, in that precise order. We both expected to encounter all five and, if we are honest, I think that we probably anticipated multiple sightings of most of these cats, particularly given the length of our tour and the fact that it was almost two weeks longer than anything our guide had been involved with previously. He was therefore used to seeing these animals in a much shorter period and although our not inconsiderable efforts were eventually rewarded with four of the five, and we were unbelievably unlucky not to see a jaguar, in all we had nine cat sightings, four of which were what you could call satisfactory, on a trip where, based on previous experience, I had expected between 20 and 30. When you read other people's trip reports, the common denominator is often the number of mammals spotted dashing furtively across a road or trail, as many species are vulnerable as soon as they leave the relative safety of the undergrowth and rarely linger while crossing in daylight. Consequently, every tour experiences a share of brief and generally unsatisfactory sightings, particularly in areas of forest or dense vegetation, where there is very little visibility beyond the open road. You never overly mind these momentary encounters, as they are inevitable in certain habitats and can actually be viewed as a bonus, complementing the rest of your more conventional and protracted sightings. Unfortunately that was not the case on this occasion, as these fleeting views were very much the norm rather than the exception and we were seeing almost nothing well, excluding the usual array of birds, several snakes and a few armadillos. At one stage we were laughing about subtitling the tour 'owls and armadillos', as without those two undeniably charming animals, I would have had almost nothing to photograph for the best part of three weeks. If that sounds unlikely, perhaps consider that by day eleven, when we encountered our 27th different mammal, a crab-eating raccoon that again did not tarry, I had taken five photographs of sufficient quality to use on this trip report, and one of those was a captive peccary. Our luck aside, which was impossibly bad for the longest period that I have ever endured, our main problem was the weather, or rather the weather that the people of Paraguay had suffered for several months prior to our arrival. I was aware of this before we travelled, as my guide had been updating me regarding the torrential and unseasonal rain that had swamped much of the country for so long, resulting in severe flooding in several regions

and the closure of a number of roads. He was not even certain whether the Pantanal, one of two main areas that the trip had been scheduled around, was going to be accessible and another destination that we had intended to visit was reluctantly dismissed before we even arrived. Miraculously, in one sense at least, the rain stopped approximately two hours prior to us landing in Asuncion and for the next three weeks the weather was blisteringly hot with barely a threat of rain. Sadly, and this is where the climatic miracle failed us, the damage had already been done, as the grass, which should have been extremely short in what is winter in the southern hemisphere, was instead green, lush and very, very tall. Similarly, the river levels, where they had not actually flooded, were exceptionally high and although this would not initially hurt us a great deal, it ultimately contributed to a disastrous visit to the Pantanal, which was unquestionably the biggest disappointment of the tour. The unhelpful combination of choking dust and gale force winds, which were again totally unseasonal, also significantly hampered us, both in terms of initially finding animals and then attempting to photograph them. As those familiar with my trip reports will already be aware, I have noticed over the last few years that it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict the weather for certain tours. Whereas you could once more or less guarantee specific meteorological conditions, particularly in many regions south of the Equator where the weather is generally more predictable, this is no longer universally the case and the majority of logistical problems encountered on tour are now weather related. Given the effects of global warming and the climate change that our planet is definitely undergoing, regardless of whether people acknowledge

it or not, it may be that we simply have to rethink much of what we have learned and accept that in future the weather is far more likely to disrupt our best laid plans, however elaborate and professional they may be. Paraguay could be a good case in point, as I always visit the Pantanal, generally in Brazil but in both Bolivia or Paraguay as well, during the dry months between July and September when the river levels are low and it is possible to view an abundance of wildlife along the riverbanks and at the ever diminishing water sources further inland. This tour was designed to utilise those same favourable conditions, but if they no longer exist, or at least do not occur with any reliability, then there will be no point either visiting or sending guests to this part of the

Pantanal. I will of course continue to monitor the situation with the assistance of my guide and hopefully the adverse conditions that so blighted our trip will turn out to be an unfortunate anomaly and not a regular feature of the region. Whilst the unwelcome combination of tall grass and high water levels made it so difficult to find mammals, neither could really account for the behaviour of those creatures once they had been observed, as almost every single animal, across a variety of species, fled as soon as it became aware of our presence. Although this may sound normal, given our propensity for killing everything that moves, it actually isn't, as many animals are at least moderately tolerant of us and some are positively inquisitive. Mammals that you would routinely expect to encounter during the day, which our guide confirmed were all common, were either almost completely absent, as was the case with the three peccary species, grey brocket deer and Brazilian cavy, or were instead only spotted at night. Chacoan mara, pampas fox and crab-eating fox were just three of the animals that we had anticipated seeing in large numbers during the day and our guide was so confident that we would enjoy better daylight views of them elsewhere, that we initially turned down opportunities to try to photograph them at night. That rather optimistic and possibly foolhardy approach lasted only as long as it took me to realise that this was no ordinary trip and that absolutely nothing could be taken for granted or guaranteed, a point superbly illustrated when we failed to find a single titi monkey, an animal that our guide had a 100% record with over about 40 different tours. Given the fact that we all too quickly adopted the sardonic trip motto that 'everything runs', I did consider that hunting pressure probably had to account for some of the abnormal behaviour that we were constantly witnessing, as animals are generally only this skittish when they are being persecuted. Although it almost certainly did play some part, our guide did not think that hunting was a significant factor in most of the regions that we visited and indeed, human encroachment appeared to be a more likely cause, as we observed a great deal of evidence that many estancia owners were clearing vast tracts of land and that entire areas were receiving little or no protection. The roads were also an issue and not only because the locals all drive too fast and we saw far too many dead animals as a result. That is sadly the case all over the world, but the difference in Paraguay, or at least in the Chaco, is that almost all of the wildlife viewing takes place on public roads. To be fair, this does occur in other countries, particularly in South America where the national parks are not always well developed or accessible, but it appears to be worse here, as it is almost impossible to escape these roads or the many private vehicles that constantly traverse them. Elsewhere in the world you would expect to leave the traffic behind when you enter a national park and begin searching for wildlife in at least relatively peaceful conditions, but in Paraguay the opposite is the case, as

you access the national park in order to reach your accommodation and then leave it again to begin looking for animals on the roads that circumnavigate the parks. There is no true wilderness to speak of, or at least none that you can reach, and instead everything takes place on the same roads that you are sharing with monstrous cattle trucks and speeding pickups. Several of our sightings were ruined by passing traffic and it eventually became a standing joke that as soon as we spotted an animal, or attempted to stake out an area quietly, a huge vehicle would automatically race out of nowhere to shatter both the tranquillity and our chances. The fact that they also covered us in dust was almost immaterial, as our own vehicle was just as bad and whenever we pulled up quickly to photograph an animal, we produced an impenetrable enveloping cloud and would have to wait at least 30 seconds literally for the dust to settle, by which time the startled creature had unsurprisingly disappeared. I missed a picture of a puma in this way and the fact that we could

never escape the road and search for wildlife in a more natural, harmonious setting, at least not in our vehicle on that first section of the tour, was for me, the most disheartening aspect of our time in Paraguay. If this all sounds fairly depressing, in some respects it undoubtedly was, but we still enjoyed several wonderful highlights and I certainly learned a great deal, which is very much the purpose of these intense research trips. I make a point of never sending guests to areas that I have not visited myself and all of my exploratory tours are specifically designed to eliminate as much risk and effort for my guests as possible and to enable me to provide accurate advice regarding every aspect of each region, from the prospective wildlife and important environmental concerns to the standard of accommodation and any related travel issues. Whilst there is not a great deal that anyone can do about the public roads,

the weather and our almost implausible ill fortune are of course variables that can certainly improve and I do not feel that on this occasion our less than positive experiences were truly representative of the country as a prospective wildlife destination. As far as I am concerned, the Gran Chaco is one of the natural wonders of South America and, based on my own previous visits, other people's tours and our guide's comprehensive knowledge, I would suggest that very few trips could possibly be as unsatisfactory as ours, certainly if the weather was fair and ground conditions were as expected in each area. As disappointing as our visit regrettably was, we still encountered fifty unique and beautiful mammals, many of which are comparatively rare and difficult to observe elsewhere. If you could therefore improve the quality of many of our sightings and perhaps add a jaguar and a giant anteater to our list, then a basically unsuccessful tour is suddenly transformed into an unforgettable adventure. One or two genuinely great sightings can really make all the difference to a wildlife trip and whilst there remain very few circumstances in which I could imagine recommending Paraguay over say Brazil as a wildlife destination, if your only priority is finding as many elusive animals as possible, then you could do far worse than visit the Chaco, be it in Paraguay, Bolivia or Argentina. I was very excited about returning, as I was last in the Chaco in 2011, coincidently on a tour of Bolivia that was also massively impacted by erratic weather, and I again had my son James with me. It goes without saying that it is an immense pleasure to be able to travel with my son, but it is also a great help, as James has always loved searching for wildlife and his dedication, particularly at night with a spotlight, has been invaluable. Between us we try to photograph or film much of what we see and a large number of the photographs that appear on these trip reports and on my website, would not exist without James' assistance and unbridled enthusiasm. Our guide's passion and application were also beyond reproach and whilst the veritable mammal fest that we had all hoped for did not quite materialise, this was not as a result of any failing on his part, as he worked extremely diligently on our behalf and remained entirely flexible throughout the tour, which can be incredibly important when a trip is not going as planned and often drastic changes are required. Indeed, I had wanted to work with this guide for

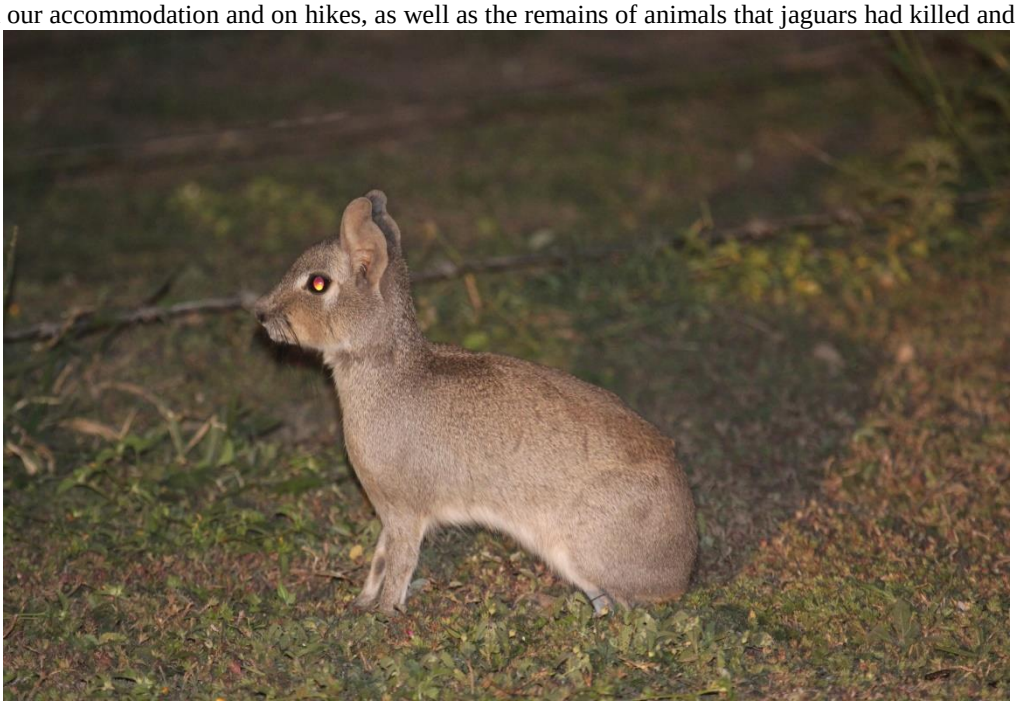
some time, as he owns his own wildlife travel company and has a terrific reputation both within and beyond Paraguay. We come from similar backgrounds within the UK, environmentally not geographically speaking, and it quickly became apparent that we share many ecological and political views. As such, we got on well, which is certainly useful when a protracted expedition is not going particularly well, and although I would have arranged one or two minor factors slightly differently, the vast majority of the tour was capably organised and, the unpredictable climatic conditions aside, ran smoothly enough. I definitely had no issues with our guide's knowledge or determination and in fact, none of us really did anything wrong or gave up. We all worked tirelessly to the very end and it was just one of those experiences that you are relieved has happened to you and not to one of your guests. Excluding a brief detour to assess the access to Iguazu National Park from the Paraguay side, the tour was split into three main sections beginning in the Gran Chaco and ending at two very different but equally important conservation projects in eastern Paraguay. In between, we would journey south to Argentina to visit the vast Ibera Wetlands and specifically the Ibera Project, a conservation initiative created by the visionary Douglas Tompkins, an environmentalist and philanthropist who has worked tirelessly to protect huge tracts of land across both Chile and Argentina. The Ibera Wetlands actually form part of the Gran Chaco, albeit a very different part to the arid and largely

impenetrable forest and scrub that most people will recognise as typical Chaco and that we spent much of our first three weeks within. In reality, and despite the general misconception that the entire area consists of this parched scrubland, the Gran Chaco is not one single ecosystem, but a series of diverse and contrasting habitats that form a huge lowland wilderness region across four countries, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. Large sections of the Chaco closely resemble the Pantanal, not only in terms of similar vegetation, but also with regards to the sprawling cattle ranches that so dominate the floodplains of the more renowned and consequently more popular Pantanal. In reality, the Gran Chaco and Pantanal are two of the world's premier wildlife destinations, which share, at several locations at least, a number of characteristics and many of the same bird and mammal species.

The Gran Chaco actually includes the Paraguayan section of the Pantanal and as we drove north from Asuncion, past green, partially flooded savannah littered with palm trees, we could have easily been driving along Brazil's celebrated Transpantaneira Highway. The region is also an interesting one historically, as it was the backdrop of the Chaco War that raged between Paraguay and Bolivia, at the time two of the most impoverished countries in South America, in the early 1930's. Although neither side could muster outright victory, Paraguay technically had the better of a conflict that was estimated to have killed around 100,000 men and consequently

received almost three quarters of the disputed territory when a peace treaty and settlement was signed in 1938, three years after a truce had brought the bloody struggle to an end. The horrific irony was that both nations had fought each other to a standstill and to the very brink of economic ruin, over land that was believed to have been rich in oil, but that ultimately proved to be almost worthless. As with so many senseless conflicts over the ages, the blood of the young lay spilt at the whims of the old and both countries were destined to suffer decades of unrest and upheaval, much of which can be traced back to the inevitable coups that followed the ceasefire of 1935. My trip reports very rarely include a day by day account of our adventures and this one will be no exception, basically because I cannot face recording so many blank hours and would not expect anyone to read such a tale of unmitigated woe. Instead, I will concentrate largely on the positives, of which there were a few, or at least on the truly notable negatives, as heroic disasters are often

far more entertaining than mediocre triumphs and we had more than our fair share of both on this trip. Sadly we were unable, well actually I was unable, to 'treat those two imposters just the same' and whilst Rudyard Kipling was undoubtedly a talented writer and a fine human being, I am fairly certain that even his resolve would have been severely tested on this trip. Jaguars were a notable case in point, as I have never spent so long within the territory of these mysterious shadows without seeing at least one and even now I remain perplexed that we failed to do so. We observed and followed fresh tracks more times than I can remember and on several occasions a jaguar walked directly along the road that we had just driven down, once within no more than five minutes of our departure. We found new tracks around our accommodation and on hikes, as well as the remains of animals that jaguars had killed and fed upon just hours before. On one highly charged and unforgettable occasion, we stood on a small bridge surrounded by dense vegetation and were actually able to smell a jaguar within a few metres of us. It was not the faint trace of a creature that had already moved on, but the heavy pungent scent of the largest predator on the continent almost certainly watching us and the tension was palpable as we stood within a single pounce of such a powerful beast without the protection of a vehicle. It is the great beauty of the Americas, that you can walk unaccompanied where so many wondrous animals occur and although we were sadly not destined to see a jaguar on this trip, I did at least manage to record one with my trusty camera trap. Even this was unfortunate in a way, as we had the option of either staking out a water source within a few minutes walk of our camp or instead searching the territory that we knew a dominant male cat had patrolled the previous evening. As we had just missed it the night before, we decided to try the road again and I set the camera trap at the waterhole just in case it made an appearance there. The next morning I almost wished that I had not bothered, as, needless to say on such an ill-fated tour, we had chosen the wrong option and my camera trap had recorded our overly stealthy quarry sauntering nonchalantly to the edge of the water for a lengthy drink. Whilst naturally disappointed to have



missed such an iconic animal, we were not actually that perturbed, as we knew that we had been very close and that our photographs were further proof that we were very likely to encounter a jaguar at some stage. That at least was our thinking at the time, but as the days slipped away, so did our optimism and I think that we all knew long before the end that it was just not going to happen on this occasion. The same was true of giant anteaters and although we went to extraordinary lengths to find one later in the trip, this was the first time that I have visited areas in which these distinctive animals occur without seeing one. It was a 100% record that I always believed I would maintain, as they are generally easy to find and photograph, and my failure to do so further highlighted, particularly as the tour sagged towards its conclusion, just how unfortunate we had been in many ways. I was relieved to be able to say that we were slightly luckier with puma, as these gorgeous cats have always been a favourite of mine and I have historically been privileged to encounter a large number across several different countries on two continents. We actually found this one whilst checking jaguar tracks and followed slowly as it walked along the road in front of our vehicle before crossing maybe twenty metres ahead. Sadly, as we stopped to let it cross, we produced the inevitable plume of dust and I decided to wait for it to settle before taking my shot, principally because I had already attempted to photograph a skunk earlier that evening and the combination of dust and the beam from the spotlight had produced the usual snow-like mess that I was eager to avoid with a puma. In retrospect it was a bad mistake, as I missed that shot and although the animal had been very calm and I had therefore been fairly confident that I would get another opportunity, events overtook us and that did not ultimately occur. It should have, as I told our guide that once the puma had crossed and disappeared out of sight, we would drive around the corner and wait quietly to give it time to re-emerge, which I was certain it would do at some stage. It actually worked perfectly, as the puma was sitting just on the road as we returned and I steadied myself for our guide to stop in order for me to finally take my shot. Most regrettably and to my complete consternation, that never actually occurred, as our guide's view was partially obstructed and instead of breaking slowly, he drove directly at the by now fairly alarmed puma, which he had simply not seen. James and I attempted to warn him to stop at exactly the same time, but our protestations were belated and ultimately unnecessary, as the puma took one final look at our vehicle, which was actually moving very slowly, and sprung, from a sitting position, several metres into the undergrowth. It was a breathtaking and unforgettable leap by such a powerful animal, but sadly it was the last that we would see of this particular puma, entirely understandably given the fact that we appeared to be about to mow it down, and our only sighting of either of the two larger cats during the entire trip. Five or six minutes over a 34-day trip was hardly what I had hoped for or expected in terms of jaguar and puma encounters, but there is always the possibility that this type of mishap may transpire when you are looking for relatively rare mammals in general wildlife regions, as opposed to searching particular areas that have been specifically selected in order to find one target animal. However, the same cannot be said of many relatively common animals and I had simply not expected just how difficult, in some cases almost impossible, it would be to find a number of species that you more or less take for granted when travelling in other parts of South America. Nor had our guide by all accounts and I think that we both still find it difficult to comprehend that, after three full weeks in the Gran Chaco, we experienced one single encounter with each of the three peccary species, white-lipped, collared and Chacoan. This would not have been so bad if even one of them could have been considered a great sighting, but all three were brief and all three involved animals, a herd in the case of the white-lipped peccaries and single peccaries in terms of the other two species, crossing the road at distance. I was particularly disappointed that we did not have better views of the endangered Chacoan peccary, as I have encountered relatively few of these animals over the years and their story is a fascinating one. For decades they were believed to be an extinct species that had been described purely from fossil remains, until a group of scientists discovered a live herd in Argentina in the

early 1970's. The legend has it that one of the scientists found some old bones that he did not recognise in a small village and, after asking which animal the bones belonged to, he eventually ascertained that not only was an entire 'extinct' species thriving, but that the indigenous people were still routinely hunting and eating them. Sadly they are still hunted for their meat and this, coupled with the habitat destruction that has already devastated immense sections of Chaco, the majority of which receives almost no protection, has seen their numbers seriously decline in recent years. Our guide had arranged for us to visit a Chacoan peccary sanctuary during our stay and although it was heartening to see such a healthy population and to learn how well these indomitable creatures are breeding in captivity, the fact remains that there are very few areas where they can be released safely. As a qualified and much published zoologist, our guide is involved with several projects of this kind, indeed we visited five with him on this one trip, and I will of course monitor the progress of this reserve with close interest. As with all of the conservation initiatives that I either support or follow, visits can be arranged for my guests, which will of course help to protect the future of these and other equally vulnerable animals. Whilst I very rarely take photographs of wildlife in captivity, and almost never publish them, I am happy to state that the above picture was taken at this important sanctuary, which is also home to a large number of wild animals, including Chacoan mara and common yellow-toothed cavy. As much as I enjoy planning specialist mammal expeditions, I am just as happy to organise general wildlife trips, which can be even more rewarding in many ways and certainly involve less pressure. This tour for example, would have been a great deal more satisfying had I not been searching almost exclusively for rare mammals, as we encountered a massive array of diverse wildlife, including eleven different species of snake. South American rattlesnakes were the most common, I think that we observed more than ten on a single night drive, but we also found coral snakes, racers, rainbow boas and, in the Pantanal, a large number of lanceheads or pit vipers, one of which James memorably did not see until he accidently nudged it with his boot. Luckily,

and on this occasion I use that word in its purest sense, the highly venomous serpent was in a benign mood and slithered away without inflicting any punishment for being so carelessly disturbed. It could of course have happened to any one of us and we were all slightly more cautious after that fortunate escape, as pit vipers have a fearsome reputation, their venom attacks the nervous system and causes multiple organ failure, and are responsible for a large number of human deaths each year. Scorpions and tarantulas were also common and one of the most interesting events of the entire trip was watching a tarantula hawk wasp dragging a large spider, that she had stung and paralysed, to her burrow. I cannot call the event enjoyable, as the poor tarantula was facing a very unpleasant end, but it was fascinating to watch this relatively small creature, large for a wasp, but much smaller than the spider, drag its massive prey such a prodigious distance. Sadly, the sleeping arachnid's fate was sealed, as the wasp would lay an egg on the spider before sealing the tunnel and leaving her offspring to hatch and slowly devour the tarantula. The non-essential organs would all be eaten first, to ensure that the spider remained alive as long as possible whilst it was feasted upon. Remarkably, the female wasp can dictate the sex of their young by choosing whether to fertilise her egg or not and she then feeds the baby accordingly. An unfertilised egg will produce a male, which are not as large as females, as they will never need to attack tarantulas. Consequently, hawk wasps retain the biggest prey for the fertilised eggs that will produce a female and feed their male young the smaller spiders that they catch. As with so much of

nature, the entire process is miraculously clever, but I have to admit that the sight of the paralysed tarantula being dragged to its doom was more than a little macabre. A vast array of strikingly colourful butterflies and distinctive hawkmoths were far easier on the eye and we encountered an equally impressive collection of frogs, although yet again this was not always an entirely pleasant experience, as they were often being consumed by the vibrant waterbirds that decorate the passing estancias during scorching forays into an unforgiving Chaco. Over 700 species of birds have been recorded in Paraguay and many of these, particularly the raptors and waders,

are easily observed from the side of the road, as just about every fence post seems to have a hawk of some description permanently attached and at times the storks, herons and ibises appear to outnumber even the cattle. I have never felt the need to record the birds that I see, indeed I only started doing so for mammals because I was asked so frequently, but I have always had an interest in all wildlife and I learnt long ago that the more creatures you take the time to marvel at, the more marvellous creatures you will see. Whilst I firmly believe this principle, which is why I often espouse the merits of general, more relaxed tours, it is of course occasionally difficult to retain such a tranquil approach and at times on this trip, my resolve at least, if not exactly my ideology, was sorely tested. Our stay in the Chaco had begun in disappointing fashion, partly due to a lack of high quality sightings, which can really set the tone for a tour, and partly because we had to spend the best part of four days without a vehicle as a result of various mechanical problems. However the situation did not appear to be dire or beyond redemption, for although our encounters had been almost universally poor, we were finally starting to see some of our more elusive targets and we were yet to visit the best two wildlife destinations of the trip, Los Tres Gigantes Biological Station in the Pantanal and Defensores del Chaco national park in the very heart of the humid Chaco. We had already managed reasonable views, albeit all at night, of pampas and crab-eating foxes, when we got our first glimpse, and it really was a glimpse as it sprinted across the road in front of our vehicle, of a geoffroy's cat. We would ultimately enjoy more success with this cat than any other, but of our five sightings of seven geoffroy's cats in total, only the final one in Argentina lasted more than a few seconds. No matter, we were at least seeing mammals and we all reasoned that it was only a matter of time before something rare stopped and at least looked back at us before inexorably scarpering. It was not to be with two molina's hog-nosed skunks, which fled as fast as their little scrabbling legs could carry them, nor with the only southern tamandua that we were destined to see, which

also ran across the road as we approached before unfathomably disappearing into probably the shortest grass of the entire tour. I still have no idea how we lost that particular anteater, as it was only a few seconds ahead of us and, for once, we had excellent visibility across the entire field. I can only guess that it probably found a temporary burrow to hide in and continued its journey towards the safety of the tree line when we had finally departed. Despite finding their unmistakable mischievous tracks on numerous walks, particularly when we did not have any transport in the early stages, it took ten days to spot our first crab-eating raccoon, but this too joined the ranks of 'everything runs' and it would be another week or so before I eventually managed to take a photograph of a thoroughly unique creature that always, whenever and however you see it, appears to look guilty. The ubiquitous owls aside, and there were so many that at one stage I thought that I must be in a Harry Potter story, the only two animals that we enjoyed any early success with were tapirs, which we saw a lot of but again not that well, and armadillos, which salvaged more than a few blank days and provided a lot of fun as they darted about like remote controlled toys. Whilst we would encounter a fifth later on, in the Chaco we observed four different types of armadillo and I was particularly happy to find and photograph the large hairy and screaming hairy species. The latter was spotted by James resting at the edge of its burrow and only occurs in the Chaco region of Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina. James also spotted our first tapir on his side of our vehicle and by the time that I had turned, it had already disappeared into the impenetrable vegetation. Impenetrable means exactly that in the Chaco and, given that it was impossible to follow even an animal of that size for more than a few metres, I immediately looked for an opening further along the road. I did not really have any great expectation of still finding the tapir, but I noticed a disused farm track and beckoned James to follow me as I climbed the old gate and ran along the neglected trail in an attempt to get us into a good position before the tapir possibly crossed the path. Infuriatingly, I was just seconds too late, as I jogged, I was intentionally not sprinting as I did not want to make a lot of noise and scare the tapir, around a slight bend and almost ran straight into the surprised animal, which had moved through the dense undergrowth faster than we had moved around it. It was still a fantastic view of what is the largest terrestrial land mammal in South America, but I had no chance of a photograph, as the startled creature took one look at me and instantly disappeared from whence it came. This was the only tapir that we would see during the day and five of our remaining six sightings would occur on one remarkable night, when we initially spotted an adult slowly walking into the bushes before discovering four tapirs within approximately one hundred metres of each other in the same field. One was clearly a mother with an adorable calf, still brown with characteristic white stripes and spots. The remaining two were both adults and in normal circumstances I would have attempted to get much closer to at least one of them, as I have spent a lot of time with these endearing animals over the years and it is possible to approach them, as long as you do so slowly, quietly and, most importantly, downwind. However, we had a number of factors against us on this occasion, as we could only retain a view of the tapirs with a spotlight, the grass was almost head high in places and large sections of the field were completely flooded. I did not mind the water of course, but there would have been no way of approaching without greatly disturbing the tapirs and I did not want to shine a spotlight directly at them at very close quarters, particularly as one of the females had young. We therefore had to settle for distant, partially obscured binocular views and a few hopeless reference photographs, which was actually fine, as approaching some animals on foot can be okay if you are responsible, but you have to know when your presence is going to be harmful and when to back off. We did return the following evening and although we found another adult, it was in an even more difficult position and we again determined that we would let feeding tapirs lie. Sadly, although we continued to discover plenty

of evidence of their presence, we would not see another tapir during the last four weeks of the tour. As I have already touched upon, our difficulties were twofold, as finding certain mammals was proving to be more challenging than anticipated and, in addition, some of the animals that we were finding were simply not behaving as I would normally expect. Of course there are often significant behavioural inconsistencies across species and regions, but the fact remains that animals that I would anticipate viewing during the day were only being observed at night and the majority of these were displaying behaviour that I would generally associate with either hunting pressure or the loss of habitat. The plains viscacha was a prime example, as our guide was aware of several productive areas for this animal and was used to encountering them in reasonable numbers. He described them as being comparatively calm, which was my experience of them as well, and was confident that it would be a fairly easy process to take a decent photograph. However, the reality was very different, as we found just one or two at each location, despite the fact that they live in communal burrows, and they were all skittish, instantly running as we approached either in the vehicle or on foot. I had more or less given up on getting a shot when we unexpectedly spotted one at the side of the road and instantly stopped. I had basically a second to take the picture that appears on the top of page four of this report, as the surprised rodent bolted as soon as I flashed and there was no second opportunity. That was the only viscacha photograph of the entire trip and with odds like that, one second or bust, it was no wonder that I had very few pictures of the thirty or so mammals that we had seen to date. The situation was not destined to improve, but we remained optimistic and as we drove towards the Pantanal and the first of two genuinely world class wildlife destinations, we were all convinced that we would finally turn the fleeting glimpses that we had been experiencing to date into magnificent and unforgettable encounters. Just as we started the long journey to Bahia Negra, the gateway to the Paraguay River and the Pantanal, a lesser grison ran across the road and as we were nearing our destination, a tayra did exactly the same thing in the opposite direction. We took each as good portent for our coming stay, but the sightings had lasted a combined total of maybe two or three seconds and we would see neither animal again. I cannot speak for anyone else, but there was a nagging doubt in the back of my mind that a pattern was beginning to emerge and that climatic and ground conditions may necessitate a change of plan and possibly some adjustments to the itinerary. Little did I know that the decision would be made for us within less than 24 hours of our arrival at Los Tres Gigantes or ‘The Three Giants’, exotically named after the giant armadillo, the giant river otter and the giant anteater. Even on the boat ride in we knew that we were in trouble, as the water levels were so high it was impossible to see the riverbanks where you would normally expect to spot most of the wildlife. Apart from distant trees, in which we would see our first howler monkeys and a grey four-eyed opossum, only the floating vegetation was visible and when we arrived the resident biologists confirmed that they were seeing very little around the station. To make matters worse, I quickly discovered that two of the three walking trails were at least partially flooded, which was disastrous just in terms of the noise that you would make wading through water, particularly at night. It did not appear that the situation could possibly deteriorate any further, so of course it did. The unseasonal high winds that we had experienced throughout much of the trip, which in turn had made the dust such an issue in a number of areas, now really came back to haunt us, as floating water hyacinths were being blown into the bends of the river in huge numbers and were forming massive, almost impenetrable barriers. The river arteries were literally being clogged in front of our eyes and it took half an hour to breach just a small section on our first exploratory boat ride, before we arrived at a barricade at least four times as large and had to turn back. It was hopeless and although we tried again the next morning, this time breaking through two dense patches, we were stopped at a more or less impassable section on a double bend. We might have got through eventually, but the obstruction stretched for at least a kilometre and it would have taken several hours, only for us to then face another barrier almost immediately. We could not use either the river or the trails effectively, which is basically all there is at Los Tres Gigantes and, as the

water levels were so high, most of the animals could not even reach us. It was a recipe for disaster and after more than a year of planning, I had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave immediately. Although I ultimately had no choice given the impossible conditions, I was still reluctant to move on, as I always visit the Pantanal at this time of year, when the river levels are generally low and a diverse collection of animals congregate around the diminishing water sources further inland. The results, in terms of great daylight sightings at close quarters, are usually spectacular and I had intended to spend almost a week in the Pantanal on this trip. As it was, we decided to take an extra day and night exploring around Bahia Negra before moving on to Defensores del Chaco, where our main hopes, and probably the success or otherwise of the entire expedition, would now rest. There was a solemn air to proceedings as we reluctantly slipped back along the Paraguay River, where at one point we were just metres from both Bolivia and Brazil, and a one-second glimpse of a giant river otter diving into the water did very little to improve the atmosphere. Getting away from the river however, thankfully did, for although the tour had unquestionably suffered a major setback, things can change very quickly on these intense mammal trips and one great sighting can immediately transform an ordinary tour into a magical one. That did not exactly happen at Bahia Negra, it was here that we would smell the jaguar on the bridge without seeing it, but we did finally enjoy

some success and, with hindsight, should probably have stayed longer. Both crab-eating foxes and raccoons were easily observed at night, with the latter finally posing for photographs and displaying the type of inquisitive behaviour that makes them so much fun to spend time with, and during the day we would encounter grey brocket deer, one of the few relatively common animals in several areas, and our one scurrying azara's agouti of the trip. Although we missed out on a jaguar, the compensation at Bahia Negra, in the form of two new cats, was as significant as it was welcome. The first two sightings were not a great deal better than we had experienced previously, another brief glimpse slinking across a road and a distant view at night, albeit for much longer, with the assistance of binoculars and a spotlight. However, as the animals in question were both jaguarundis, which was one of our main target species, we were more or less prepared to overlook these shortcomings and just gratefully accept even these severely compromised encounters. Two jaguarundis in the hand was certainly better than a jaguar in a bush and things improved still further when we spotted the first of two ocelots which, thank all the gods, was totally calm and allowed us to approach with a spotlight. It is incredible how often ocelots salvage quiet or unproductive night drives, as they are exceedingly beautiful animals and are customarily relaxed in our presence. The second one, despite having only one eye, was no exception and we were able to watch it hunt for several minutes before it finally pounced out of sight. After the unmitigated disaster of the Pantanal, our extra time at Bahia Negra had greatly lifted the spirits and we moved on to Defensores del Chaco with a renewed optimism, an optimism that would ultimately prove to be utterly unfounded. Defensores is indisputably another rich wildlife destination, indeed, it was one of the two areas that this first section of the trip had been planned around, and although it remained unaffected by swollen rivers, floating vegetation and gale force winds, it did have another problem that I had not initially considered, there were no animals. If that sounds somewhat unrealistic, I do mean almost exactly that, as we spent a few minutes watching a small troop of azara's night monkeys, but some rabbits and a fleeting view of a crab-eating fox aside, that was basically it for one of the most productive wildlife habitats in Paraguay. We thought at least that we must encounter a Chacoan titi monkey, an animal that I had last seen at Kaa-Iya in the Bolivian Gran Chaco, as our guide had never failed to see this species at a national park that he has been visiting for many years. However, although we heard the familiar calls of these suddenly elusive primates, we could not find even one over the best part of three days and his 100% record with the titi monkey disappeared alongside mine with the giant anteater. It was that sort of trip regrettably and listening to our guide's accounts of so many wonderful sightings on previous visits, jaguar, puma, jaguarundi and tapir are just a few of the species that he has encountered here on a reasonably regular basis, really only highlighted how calamitous our stay was proving to be, as we were not even finding fresh tracks along the considerable sections of road that we were covering each day. As always, we were spending very long hours in the

field and basically trying everything, but the entire area felt unnaturally desolate and when I found a spent shotgun cartridge, I had thought that my worst fears had probably been realised, as I had been concerned that we were experiencing yet another example of a wildlife habitat irreversibly damaged by poaching. Our guide was insistent that this was not the case and although he agreed that there was inevitably some illegal hunting, he did not believe that it was significant or on a scale to produce the kind of pressure that would devastate healthy populations of so many different species. He knows the area so well that I was prepared to take him at his word, but

what was not in question, was the fact that, despite our very best efforts, we were not seeing anything and none of us could ascertain exactly why. Given the lack of an obvious explanation, I again had to make the unenviable decision for us to move on and this time we would leave the Chaco entirely, as we had all suffered three of the most unproductive weeks that I have ever known and had just two weeks remaining in which to rectify the situation. In an attempt to do so, we collectively determined that we would try a few destinations that are not traditionally as productive as the Chaco, at least not in terms of exotic mammals, but where we were likely, no one used the word guaranteed after the titi monkey debacle, to enjoy extended sightings of a few relatively common species and I could assess several important conservation projects in more detail for future tours. It was an extremely hard wrench to leave the Chaco, particularly as we were aware that we had not been able to do such an impressive ecosystem justice and that we had witnessed some of the severe problems that threaten to destroy one of the most significant wildlife environments in all of South America. Whilst its remoteness and poor soil quality have historically protected the Gran Chaco from the intensive farming that has virtually demolished the fertile cerrado of neighbouring Brazil, a burgeoning infrastructure and advancements in agriculture, particularly in terms of genetically modified crops, have resulted in substantial areas of the Chaco being cleared every year. The rate at which huge expanses are being levelled is wholly unsustainable and one area that our guide took us to had been almost completely destroyed since his previous visit just a few months earlier. Several

of the large viscacha colonies that he had routinely taken guests to, either no longer existed or had been vastly reduced and throughout our trip we gazed forlornly upon massive swathes of land illegally cleared by cattle ranchers. The soybean production that has already consumed entire regions in Brazil, Argentina and North America, is spreading across the country as quickly as the cows and genetically modified soy is now Paraguay's number one export commodity. Most of the profitable land is owned by extremely rich private individuals and there is no political will to protect wildlife or even the land itself for future generations. Harmful pesticides, utilised in enormous quantities to shield crops that simply do not belong, are swept into the streams and rivers with no concern for man or beast alike and the indigenous rural people, mainly subsistence farmers often living in extreme poverty, are further subjugated by the extensive commercial farming that they cannot compete with or earn a reasonable wage from. Corruption is rife in more or less all areas of regional and national government and the president Horacio Cartes, who was somehow elected as recently as April 2013, was arrested and twice imprisoned for illegal currency dealings in the 1980s. Although later acquitted, the tobacco baron and multi-millionaire president has a string of allegations against him, principally involving money

laundering and drug trafficking, and in 2000 law enforcement officials seized a plane on his private ranch filled with cocaine and marijuana. Whether Cartes is guilty of any criminal wrongdoing or not, and perhaps he is actually a misunderstood and unjustly maligned choirboy, at the very least he is presiding over a moral outrage, as his regime is systematically devastating one of the jewels of the continent. He is not alone of course, as deforestation continues at an almost unimaginable rate across most of the globe and the Chaco has suffered at the ignoble hands of a succession of governments in all four countries in which it falls. As deeply depressing as searching for wildlife was with huge cattle trucks thundering past, our own trivial feelings very much paled into insignificance when we stopped to consider the broader implications of the disruptive traffic and the fact that this epic region will no longer remain protected by its isolation. Now that money can clearly be made from land that had hitherto been considered virtually barren, it will take more than a few uneven dirt roads to save this unique wilderness and certainly far more principled leaders than the current administration. Sadly we left with probably more trepidation than optimism, which isn't to say that the situation is beyond hope at this stage or that our entire stay was utterly miserable. There were certainly a few wildlife highlights, seeing a puma within a few metres can never be dismissed as ordinary and four tapirs in one field was equally magical, but the majority of our other memorable highlights involved the black humour that so often develops in harsh conditions or on only moderately successful trips. Our unfeasibly laidback driver was a source of much of this humour, as he was probably the laziest human being that I have ever encountered and in more than four weeks, he did not accompany us on the Argentina section, he probably did not walk a combined total of more than about 200 metres. If between six or seven metres a day sounds unlikely, it probably is, but not by a great deal, as he would park our vehicle next to the accommodation and barely move again until it was time to leave. Although I did not witness him take a single unnecessary step during the entire trip, his personality would completely transform the moment he got behind the wheel, as if his energetic driving, which was beyond reproach on the long transfers but less impressive when he was occasionally called upon to game drive, could somehow compensate for an almost totally sedentary lifestyle. To be fair, he was even more attached to his mobile phone than his vehicle and appeared to have it permanently fixed to his hand, even in areas that we had spent several days in without a trace of a signal. If, as most partially sane people believe, Charles Darwin established beyond a great deal of doubt, 'survival of the fittest' is the key component of 'natural selection', then you have to fear that this particular individual is sadly doomed. However, I hold out some hope that his progeny may live on and that in about three million years, a large Paraguayan baby is going to be born with what appears to be a touch screen imbedded in the palm of its hand. Apart from his final dubious efforts on our behalf, which I will touch upon in due course, his finest moment probably occurred when he called to show us the 'hundreds of planes lighting up the sky', which I was immensely sorry to have to point out were merely stars and had almost certainly been there the night before. Having narrowly escaped either an alien or, even worse, a Bolivian invasion, we moved on to another unique character, an Argentinian hotel

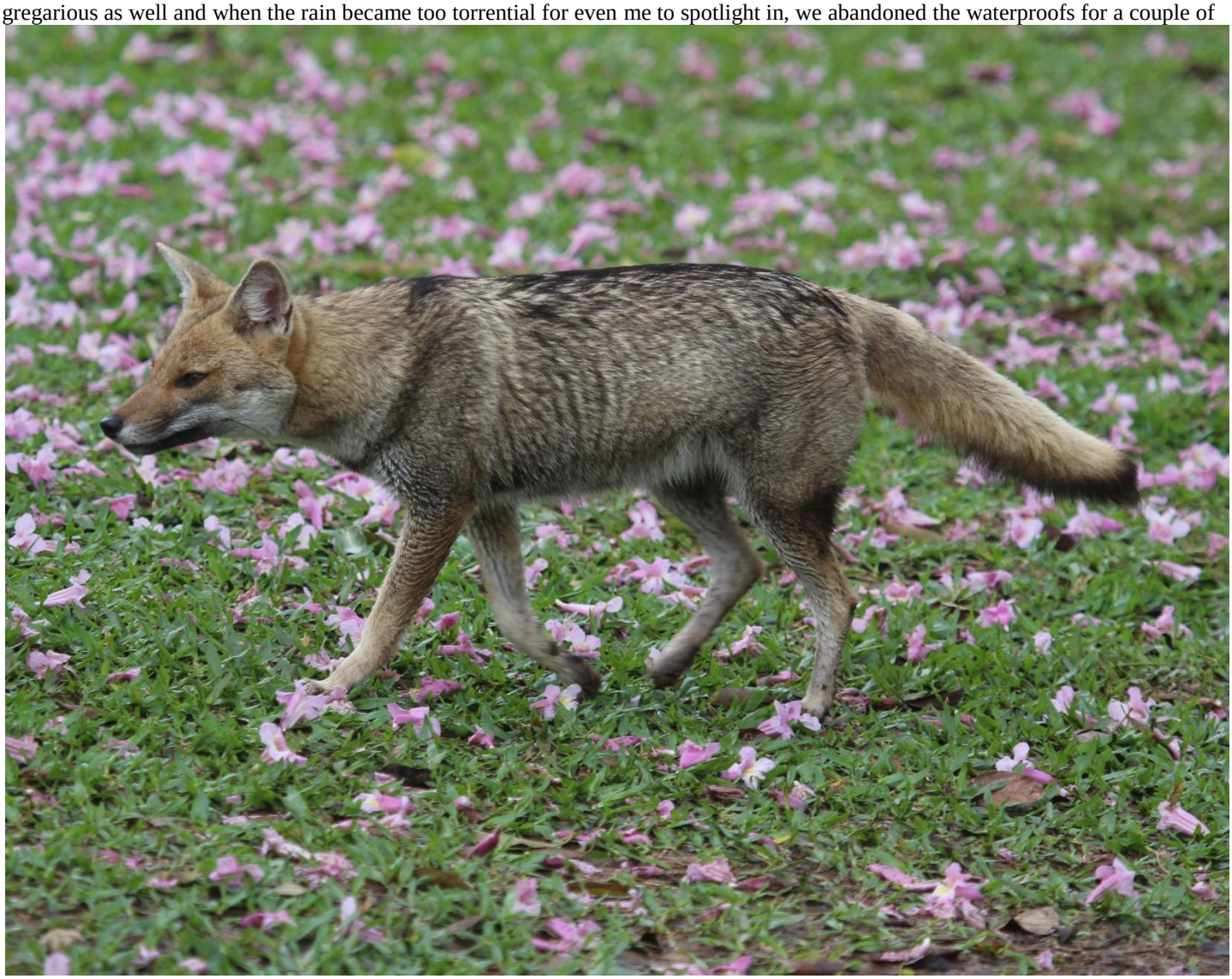
owner with a Winston Churchill fixation, an extremely loveable dog and an interesting approach regarding the quality of his establishment. When our guide asked him to save us nice rooms, he replied genuinely and without a hint of irony 'I will save you 'nice'ish' rooms, you know that I don't have any nice rooms'. Despite the fact that he insisted on discussing Hitler with any German guests, he was actually very friendly and we spent more time with his adorable dog than probably any other animal in the entire Chaco. We also saw our first geoffroy's cat during our brief stay here, although it was another fleeting encounter and we were shortly to do far better when we moved further south into Argentina. Meanwhile, Paraguay had one final disparaging slap in the face in store for us, when we spent an afternoon and night at a beautiful and equally tranquil Atlantic Forest reserve near Encarnacion, which sits on the border with Argentina. The reserve itself comprises twenty hectares of lush, almost pristine forest and one of the main trails leads down through an attractive valley. As we were due to leave early the next morning and did not therefore have a great deal of time to explore, we automatically ignored all four swimming pools and instead set out on the first of three walks, including another short walk before dinner and a much longer spotlighting session immediately after. A large variety of birds aside, for which the reserve is justly famed, we saw precisely nothing on any of our hikes and as we traipsed up the steep hill back to our lodge, we would later discover that the night watchmen, maybe 300 metres from our cosy room, had observed an owl, possibly a tawny-browed owl, swooping down and taking an unfortunate opossum, the very animal that we had been hoping to see. It was probably a white-eared opossum and whilst I had absolutely no wish to see one killed, it was typical of the tour to date that we had spent hours searching in the most suitable habitat and could have instead taken a ten-minute stroll around the grounds of the hotel. As we would repeat on several occasions, it was simply that sort of trip and a few days later our driver in Argentina described seeing exactly the same animal as he parked the car and we went to collect our spotlights. By the time we returned it had disappeared and although we searched diligently each night, we would not ultimately improve on our two opossum encounters to date, a small fat-tailed opossum in the Chaco, which was actually one of our better sightings, and a grey four-eyed opossum during our only night in the Pantanal. Despite the fact that it was only a four-night stay and that we discovered just five new animals, in many ways our brief foray into Argentina would be our most successful of the expedition, as we were finally able to spend some quality time with a nice selection of wildlife and I was also able to learn a great deal more about another Douglas Tompkins conservation initiative. Following my visit to Pumalin Park in Chile in 2013, I have been exploring the possibility of offering a tour that includes several properties owned and administered by the Conservation Land Trust, an organisation created by Douglas Tompkins to protect huge areas of fragile wilderness across both Argentina and Chile. Any such trip would certainly include the Ibera Wetlands, one of the largest wetlands on the planet, covering over three million acres of the Corrientes Province of Argentina and supporting a highly diverse collection of wildlife. Douglas and his wife Kris have purchased and conserved more than 400,000 acres throughout the region and their ultimate intention is to donate the land to the government as part of the creation of the Great Ibera Park, a strictly protected reserve that would be the largest national park in Argentina. The dream is a big one, but Tompkins and the Conservation Land Trust, in collaboration with a number of private individuals and organisations, have already achieved extraordinary things. Corcovado National Park in Chile exists primarily as a result of the efforts of Tompkins in partnership with another American philanthropist Peter Buckley and the then president Ricardo Lagos. Tompkins and Buckley acquired over 200,000 acres before approaching president Lagos with a proposition that they would donate their land to the state if the government would contribute the adjoining federal land, including the breathtaking Corcovado Volcano, to create a new protected reserve. President Lagos was keen to agree and in January 2005 the sixth largest national park in Chile was created, covering an area of more than 726,000 acres and including vast ancient forests and over eighty magnificent lakes. Tompkins is testament to the fact that individuals can change the world and as we drove towards the Ibera

Wetlands, I was excited by a first hand opportunity to observe such an important and potentially historical conservation project, particularly as it involves the reintroduction of a number of keystone species to the area, as well as the assisted recovery of many others. Jaguars, giant anteaters, giant river otters and collared peccaries are all being reintroduced and although there is some debate regarding the original presence or otherwise of giant otters, there is certainly a great deal of evidence to support the fact that they did once occur in northeast Argentina and probably as far south as Corrientes. What is not in doubt, is that they are now extinct or critically endangered across much of their former range and that they require a considerably higher level of protection than they have received to date. The same applies to a number of the iconic animals that should be thriving in the area and an integral part of the strategy, both in the short and long-term, is to provide a safe environment for a host of creatures, including puma, pampas deer, marsh deer, tapir and maned wolf. As we had already arranged a meeting with the senior project field director, at which I would outline my ideas regarding the future of wildlife tourism and the need to involve guests in initiatives that they will continue to follow and hopefully support beyond the length of their actual visit, I had not organised any activities as such and ultimately we would spend much of our time with various project researchers and field workers. Over the years I have realised that conservation, in many cases at least, cannot be successful without the assistance of the local people and that it is necessary to ensure that entire communities, as opposed to a few individuals, directly benefit from the land and wildlife that you are asking them to protect. Douglas Tompkins has always espoused this philosophy and clearly understands that ecotourism should be viewed as an essential element of any sustainable conservation initiative. It was not therefore entirely surprising that my concept of environmental tours, visiting various crucial conservation projects in specific areas, was greeted enthusiastically and within a couple of days we had outlined and agreed a very special programme for my future guests. In return for a donation that will form part of the price of the trip, the project staff at the Ibera Wetlands will provide unprecedented behind the scenes access to their work and to the wildlife that they are trying so hard to conserve. As I did during my short stay, my guests will be able to visit the key release sites of various reintroduced species and to track these animals with the assistance of radio telemetry, as the return of mammals to the areas that they formally occupied, is still very much in its infancy and it is essential that researchers are able to monitor their health and progress. To date, both

giant anteaters and collared peccaries have been restored to the territory that they once roamed and other species will certainly follow. Meanwhile, my tours will have access to the holding sites of jaguars, giant otters and other creatures awaiting their freedom and these unique programmes will also include several opportunities to spend extended periods with project staff on personal tours of the region. These tours, both on foot and in vehicles, will basically double as private game activities and will provide a wonderful insight into the work being undertaken here, as well as a privileged opportunity to search for the exceptional wildlife of the region in the company of real local experts. Although we did not have sufficient time available to assess all of these activities, we did spend an enjoyable and productive couple of hours searching for and then photographing a small herd of collared peccaries and I had hoped

that finding a giant anteater would be accomplished just as routinely. However, in accordance with the disasters already experienced to date, I should have realised that this was never going to be the case and that instead of our luck changing now that we had left Paraguay, we had simply dragged the misfortune with us. As per my visit to Pumalin Park in 2013, it rained for almost the entire duration of our stay at Ibera and on the morning that we had arranged to search for the giant anteater, not only was it absolutely pouring, but we learned that the animal we would be tracking had unexpectedly decided to make its way towards an almost entirely flooded section of the reserve. We pushed on regardless, but when you see a capybara literally swim down the path that you intend to follow, you basically know that you are in trouble and that conditions are probably not ideal. We eventually gave up after about four hours, not actually because we minded getting wet, as it was physically impossible to get any wetter by that stage, but because the water had almost reached our chest and we would actually need to swim in order to continue the pursuit, which we could not do with our camera equipment. It was a great shame, as this was the first time that I had visited areas of South America where giant anteaters occur without seeing one and it was difficult not to feel disappointed at the demolition of a record that had lasted so many years and had encompassed so many truly memorable sightings. The incessant and torrential rain aside, there were not, however, too many setbacks at Ibera and we were all delighted to encounter a geoffroy's cat with two mellanistic kittens on one of our night walks. The cat had produced her very special litter within close proximity of the reserve

headquarters and was incredibly calm around people, despite the fact that she was not fed and did not appear on a regular basis. Indeed, we did not see her again during our stay and one of the local guides informed us that this was only the second occasion that she had been observed with her kittens. After so many transitory glimpses of various cats throughout the tour, it was exceptionally satisfying to be able to savour such a superb event and although I took a great deal of care not to follow or disturb the kittens, at one stage, the relaxed mother walked directly towards us and sat down to wait for her offspring to arrive. It was a magical moment, particularly given the frustration endured to date and the very next night, in almost exactly the same spot, I photographed a nine-banded armadillo, our fifth and final armadillo species of the trip. Ideally we would have spent at least another couple of days at Ibera, as we were finally relishing an element of success and it would have been nice to explore such a productive habitat in better weather. As it was, and despite the generally appalling climatic conditions, we enjoyed good views of both local fox species, pampas and crab-eating, all three deer, pampas, marsh and grey brocket, as well as a bedraggled troop of howler monkeys, several feral pigs and a family of three especially shy neotropical otters. Having discovered their holt on the day that we arrived, we saw these otters I believe on five separate occasions, but they were very nervous and whenever we attempted to get even slightly closer, be it in a vehicle or on foot, they would instantly disappear for a prolonged period. If more time had been available, I would have probably staked them out, but our relatively brief visit included long drives in and out of the area and all too soon it was time to leave. I was sorry to do so for a variety of reasons, as the break had been a refreshing one and I had relished the opportunity to spend time learning more about the Conservation Land Trust and the hugely important work taking place in the Ibera Wetlands. I had also enjoyed having a different and far more enthusiastic driver for a few days, someone who actually took an interest in what we were doing and actively attempted to help in the field. He was far more gregarious as well and when the rain became too torrential for even me to spotlight in, we abandoned the waterproofs for a couple of



hours and headed to the lodge pool table. James and I took on our guide and driver and with the score locked at two frames apiece, I betrayed a thoroughly misspent youth by rolling in a seven-ball clearance that earned us a thrilling 3-2 triumph. If that is perhaps stretching the significance of our victory just slightly, it was at least nice to relax for a few hours and the next leg of what had been a fairly demanding trip to date, was also likely to be reasonably comfortable, as I had never visited Iguazu Falls from Paraguay before and I wanted to assess how easy a day trip would be from that country. The simple answer was very, as we moved back into Paraguay and onto Brazil with no major issues and were soon gazing at some of the most spectacular views on earth. I say 'some of', as Iguazu

is actually a mesmerising collection of 275 individual waterfalls spread across almost three kilometres of lush forest. Every possible angle and position affords yet another staggering perspective, but what relatively few people realise, is that Paraguay had its very own Iguazu in the form of Guaira Falls, which was considered to be the largest waterfall in the world in terms of volume. Located just twenty kilometres north of Iguazu on the Parana River between Brazil and Paraguay, Guaira comprised eighteen separate waterfalls in seven major sections and at their peak during high water levels, it was estimated that the flow over Guaira could reach approximately 1.7 million cubic feet per second, compared to the 212,000 cubic feet of water that cascades over Niagara Falls every second. I have no idea how accurate these figures are, but I have seen photographs of Guaira, or the Seven Falls as they were known, and can only

despair that something so resplendent was lost to the world. Guaira was submerged by the creation of the Itaipu Dam in 1982, a hydroelectric plant built by Brazil and Paraguay, who both claimed the falls as their own, before both agreeing to destroy them. At the same time, the Brazilian government blasted the sunken falls to either ensure safer navigation of the newly created river or that they could never be restored to their former glory, depending on your perspective. Whilst it would be grossly unfair to suggest that Guaira makes Iguazu look like a dripping tap, it is interesting to compare photographs of the two falls, as there is no doubt that Guaira was far more powerful, principally because the river narrowed dramatically at one point, forcing an almost inconceivable volume of water

through a relatively small channel. The resulting power must have been incredible to behold and I have been informed that the frothing, churning waters created a deafening roar that could be heard 30 kilometres away. I will never know of course, as Guaira was destroyed before I was old enough to marvel at it and today barely anyone is aware that such a natural phenomenon even existed. Fortunately, Iguazu was as glorious as always and our short visit was further enhanced by encounters with two large groups of South American coatis, which loiter innocently around the food outlets before pouncing on anything that is not either being consumed or actually worn. From Iguazu we moved back into Paraguay and a short distance north to our penultimate destination, Mbaracayu Forest Nature Reserve, the first of two final conservation projects that I wanted to research before returning home. Surrounded by the Mbaracayu Biosphere Reserve, Mbaracayu protects a healthy area of mainly pristine Atlantic Forest, as well as a large section of cerrado, and is one of the most diverse reserves in the country. In addition to a vast array of plant life, the reserve is home to over 400 species of birds and more than 90 mammals. Jaguar, puma, jaguarundi and tapir all occur, and are observed reasonably regularly, but other residents are far more elusive and you would have to be fortunate to encounter either of the two small cats, margay and oncilla, or indeed a bush dog. I did not have any targets as such, although a jaguar would have been fairly agreeable at this late stage and I knew that the cerrado would provide a decent chance of maned wolf. However, given our luck to date, I would have happily settled for a couple of opossums and perhaps a hairy dwarf porcupine, which are incredibly sweet and a particular favourite of mine. Regardless of any sightings, it should be noted that Mbaracayu is run exceptionally well and that the educational programme for the local women, all of whom are aged between fourteen and twenty, is truly inspirational.

The entire lodge is administered by these women, who are educated in all aspects of the reserve and receive a technical degree in environmental sciences when they have completed their training. More importantly, they are all encouraged to become leaders within their communities and to contribute to the continued development of the reserve through a series of community based projects and initiatives. The majority of these women are from poor rural backgrounds and to see them empowered in this way, is as impressive as it is inspiring and Mbaracayu is worth visiting simply to support the innovative and significant progress that is being made here. The lodge itself is very nice as well, with smart clean rooms, lovely food and the freedom to explore the reserve more or less at will. The pervading atmosphere is entirely one of positivity, which was just as well, because at Mbaracayu we finally hit rock bottom, at least in terms of sightings, as during three full days and nights we observed two different species of rodent and one crab-eating fox, for maybe five seconds. That is undoubtedly the worst run that I have ever been involved with and actually eclipsed the dismal record we had set

barely two weeks before at Defensores del Chaco. Strangely, our stay never felt quite as depressing as two rats and a flash of a fox would initially appear to indicate, possibly because the surroundings were so amenable, but largely due to the fact that there was so much evidence of so many different animals. The night before we arrived, a French couple had their romantic evening stroll interrupted by a lumbering tapir and on our very first drive we found fresh jaguar and puma tracks. We added equally recent tapir

prints on our initial forest walk and within minutes of reaching the cerrado, which was sadly two and a half hours away on a very bad road, we were staring at maned wolf prints. Whilst these were admittedly not quite as fresh, it is easy to see why we remained optimistic for so long and on every drive or walk I felt that it must just be a matter of time before we saw something amazing. Sadly, the writing had been on the wall for a while and although we devoted every waking hour to the cause, the highlight of our stay at Mbaracayu, the endearing black rats aside, was a massive Tegu, which disappeared into the long grass as soon as it saw us. Apart from having discovered a great deal about an important reserve, our only real consolation was that things were unlikely to get any worse at this late stage of the tour, as our final destination would be Laguna Blanca, a rustic lodge nestled on the banks of a dazzling artesian lake. With its crystal clear waters, fine sandy beaches and an exquisite climate, Laguna Blanca is a popular resort destination for locals and is also the home to Para La Tierra, a conservation organisation that protects the habitats and species of Paraguay through scientific research and community development, including primary and high school environmental education programmes. Encompassing biologists, researchers and volunteers, Para La Tierra is involved in a wide range of projects from the daily study of the resident azara's capuchins, to the production of a lepidoptera field guide, which will detail all of the butterflies and moths recorded on the reserve. Their reptile and amphibian surveys have already uncovered ten species that were previously unknown in Paraguay and, to replace the subsistence hunting that once occurred here, Para La Tierra has established community chicken coops, which provide eggs and poultry for a large number of local families to consume and sell. In addition to promoting ecotourism as a sustainable income source for future generations Para La Tierra is responsible for the security of the reserve, including the protection of the resident wildlife, as well as the maintenance of the extensive walking trails. Given its position at the convergence of two major ecosystems, the Atlantic Forest and cerrado grasslands, Laguna Blanca is considered to be a

biodiversity hotspot and is home to a number of globally threatened birds. It is one of only four sites where the endangered white-winged nightjar can be found and although only small patches of primary forest have survived, much of the cerrado remains untouched. Unfortunately, the family members who own Laguna Blanca, do not share a collective vision or passion for it and, as such, the future of the reserve hangs in the balance. Given that the land does not presently receive any formal protection, there is a real danger that it may be sold to the highest bidder and that yet another little island of cerrado will be destroyed within a vast sea of agriculture. That is totally unnecessary, as Laguna Blanca has massive potential as a major ecotourism destination and could easily operate on a profitable basis with the right people in charge. Sadly that is not currently the case, as the family concerned is not interested in investing in the infrastructure of the reserve and the quality of the accommodation, facilities and food is poor at best. Some of the staff are lazy and apathetic and there does not appear to be a great deal of will to do much more than exist until a buyer is found. I spent some of my time removing glass bottles and rubbish from the lake and during a few spare minutes I scribbled down a handful of initial improvements that could be made at very little cost and others that would ultimately transform Laguna Blanca into a significant wildlife and birding destination. The idyllic setting and stunning beauty should alone be sufficient to produce an exceptional lodge and it would not take a great deal of determination or ambition to create an experience to rival many of the extremely expensive eco-lodges of Central and South America, several of which do not enjoy the superb natural advantages of Laguna Blanca. The fact that we did not see a great deal during our brief stay should absolutely not be held against the reserve, partly because, as I have probably adequately chronicled by now, we did not see an abundance of life anywhere in Paraguay, but mainly due to the fact that Laguna Blanca is not currently being managed as a serious wildlife destination. The view there is far too insular and this would undoubtedly need to change in order for ecotourism to flourish and ultimately protect and finance much of the conservation work taking place. It is probably naive to believe that the research and scientific discoveries, however important, will be enough to safeguard Laguna Blanca and the future for this reserve is simply to produce something that is too celebrated and too successful to be sold. Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve in Ecuador is a prime example of what can be achieved with the right leadership and motivation, as Bellavista is not particularly luxurious and is not home to dozens of easily observed iconic mammals and yet it is internationally recognised and admired. There are a number of elements to such an illustrious reputation, including the hugely impressive conservation efforts that have turned a wasteland into a paradise, the profuse birdlife, the gorgeous scenery and a generally enchanting atmosphere. However, all of these factors could equally apply to Laguna Blanca, particularly if the owners were prepared to invest some of the eventual profits into the purchase of the neighbouring land that has been so badly damaged, in order to restore it and ultimately establish a much larger protected area. I discussed a lot of these issues with our guide, as he knew the reserve very well and went to a lot of effort to show me as much of it as possible. During the day we spent time watching the azara's capuchins, which were previously known as black-striped capuchins until the species was split, with one of the Para La Tierra volunteers and at night we searched for two cerrado specialities, the white-winged nightjar and one of my favourite animals, the maned wolf. Although they were tricky to photograph, one eventually took pity on us and allowed me to venture close enough for a picture, the nightjars were far more conspicuous than the wolves and it was not until our final drive that the brocket deer we had all spotted, actually turned out to be a wolf. Whilst the view was not yet great, this particular 'fox on stilts' was about thirty metres back in longish grass, it did not appear to be overly skittish and was walking at a leisurely pace parallel to our vehicle. After almost five weeks of heartbreak and crushing disappointment, we were finally staring at one of our main targets and, as our guide instructed our driver to 'go forward', we knew that we had a fairly good chance of at least spending time with this graceful animal and of perhaps getting a decent picture. Sadly, although I believed that the instruction to go forward was

reasonably self-explanatory, meaning in my humble interpretation to proceed in a forwardly direction along the dirt road, our driver, the same guy who had been startled by hundreds of planes in the Chaco, decided that a slightly more unorthodox approach was called for and drove straight into the vegetation and directly at the startled animal. With the engine revving furiously in the long wet grass and our headlights blazing, the wolf, perhaps not entirely surprisingly, did not linger and nor did we see that particular mammal again. Indeed, we did not see any mammals again, as, a few birds aside the next morning, that was our last sighting of the tour and it somehow felt appropriate that it too had been entirely unsatisfactory. Whilst the trip never really got going and failed to live up to any of our expectations, there were a number of contributing factors that were beyond our control and I was actually extremely proud of our efforts in often tremendously difficult conditions. As I have intimated previously, our final mammal list was not a disastrous one and we probably encountered another dozen rodents and bats that I was not able to identify. Excluding a jaguar and a giant anteater, which were the glaring omissions of the trip, we missed a couple of 'easy' primates at Defensores del Chaco and I would have also

expected to see coypu, red brocket deer and perhaps one or two more opossums. However, it was the quality of the sightings that was so disappointing and at times I was sincerely grateful that I did not have guests with me. As it was, I learned a massive amount, which is really the main purpose of these trips, and would make a number of changes regarding any tours to Paraguay involving my clients. I have additional research trips planned to both Argentina and some areas within the Bolivian section of the Gran Chaco, which I have visited for a number of years and am more familiar with. Regardless of the problems we experienced on this occasion, the Chaco remains one of the premier wildlife destinations in South America and, just as the Kalahari and Okavango Delta are ideally combined in Botswana, so an extended stay in the Chaco can perfectly compliment a visit to the alluring and productive Pantanal. Organised expertly and for a suitable duration, the results could be magnificent and, as per the Brazil and Bolivia trip reports on this website, I would expect the right itinerary to produce a spectacular collection of many of the continent's iconic and captivating animals. I would also continue to consider Paraguay when planning an epic journey of this kind, as I began this report by stating that the relative disappointments of our troubled trip rather prove the rule that Paraguay should still be thought of as an outstanding wildlife destination and I very much stand by that remark. If this tour was unsuccessful, and I have to accept that it was given the time involved and my own high standards, have a look at the list of extraordinary mammals below and just imagine what a successful tour of the country could achieve.

Douglas Tompkins 1943 - 2015

As a result of a busy schedule, I had only just completed this trip report when I travelled to India in December 2015 and had not even had time to check it, let alone post it on my website. Consequently, I was not aware of the tragic death of the environmental activist and champion Douglas Tompkins when describing my visit to the Ibera Wetlands, one of the many areas that Tompkins had dedicated his life to preserving. I was staying at Ranthambore when I heard the terrible news and I immediately thought that what was an incredibly sad day for his family and friends, was a truly shocking one for the planet. In a largely unprincipled age of greed and self-interest, no individual has done more to protect the environment than Douglas Tompkins, who turned his back on his business interests towards the end of the 1980s in order to devote his life to the conservation of his beloved Patagonia. For a long time Tompkins has been a hero of mine and although some of his projects have been criticised, particularly within the regions that he fought with such determination to protect, I quickly understood that the selfish and small-minded, or those with a vested interest, usually commercial, will always oppose the philanthropic endeavours of great men or women, particularly if those endeavours cost them a single dollar in profit or force them to behave in a reasonable manner. As far as I am concerned, Tompkins was a giant among men, a visionary with huge ideas that knew no bounds and that unquestionably changed the world, as well as the lives of thousands of people. He was aware from an early stage that land restoration and the protection of wildlife, cannot hope to work in isolation and that conservation has to be practised as part of an all-encompassing package that includes the wellbeing of local people and the sustainable development of their communities. Many of the parks, which today stretch well beyond Patagonia and include the Ibera Wetlands of northern Argentina, that Tompkins has either personally forged or contributed so much towards, are now considered to be models of habitat protection and his innovative ideas regarding ecotourism, environmental education and sustainable farming, have formed the basis of countless private conservation initiatives across the globe. Douglas Tompkins clearly had an insatiable love of both life and the vulnerable wilderness ecosystems that he worked so tirelessly to preserve and it can only be hoped that those who succeed him will display the same commitment and passion that enabled a remarkable human being to accomplish so much. If his reserves and the species they protect can endure beyond the memory of the man and his countless achievements, then his legacy will be assured.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Puma	Puma concolor	One on two occasions at Teniente Enciso.
2	Ocelot	Leopardus pardalis	Two excellent sightings at Bahia Negra, both at night.
3	Geoffroy's Cat	Leopardus geoffroyi	Seven in all including a mother with two melanistic kittens at the Ibera Wetlands.
4	Jaguarundi	Herpailurus yagouaroundi	Two at Bahia Negra, one briefly during the day and the other at distance at night.
5	Maned Wolf	Chrysocyon brachyurus	One at night at Laguna Blanca.
6	Pampas Fox	Pseudalopex gymnocercus	Common in the Chaco, but less visible elsewhere.
7	Crab-eating Fox	Cerdocyon thous	Abundant in some areas and observed at almost every major location.
8	Lesser Grison	Galictis cuja	One running across the road on the drive to Bahia Negra.
9	Tayra	Eira barbara	One running across the road and leaping into the vegetation on the same drive to Bahia Negra.
10	Giant River Otter	Pteronura brasiliensis	Brief sighting of one diving into the river on the return boat journey from Los Tres Gigantes to Bahia Negra.
11	Neotropical Otter	Lontra longicaudis	Family of three on several occasions at the Ibera Wetlands.
12	Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk	Conepatus chinga	Two individuals on night drives in the Gran Chaco, one at Fortin Toledo and the second at Laguna Salada.
13	South American Coati	Nasua nasua	Extended encounters with two large groups at Iguazu Falls.
14	Crab-eating Raccoon	Procyon cancrivorus	Low numbers at Laguna Capitan and common at Bahia Negra.
15	Southern Tamandua	Tamandua tetradactyla	One crossing the road at Fortin Toledo.
16	Lowland Tapir	Tapirus terrestris	Seven in total in the Chaco, including four in one field and five on one night drive at Laguna Salada.
17	Grey Brocket Deer	Mazama gouazoubira	Relatively common at several locations.
18	Marsh Deer	Blastocerus dichotomus	Numerous at the Ibera Wetlands.
19	Pampas Deer	Ozotoceros bezoarticus	Three at distance at the Ibera Wetlands.
20	Chacoan Peccary	Catagonus wagneri	One lone animal crossing the road at Laguna Capitan.
21	Collared Peccary	Pecari tajacu	Individual crossing the road at Fortin Toledo and eight reintroduced animals at the Ibera Wetlands.
22	White-lipped Peccary	Tayassu pecari	Herd crossing the road near Mariscal Estigarribia.
23	Feral Pig	Sus scrofa scrofa ssp	One pair and a few individuals at the Ibera Wetlands.
24	Black-and-Gold Howler Monkey	Alouatta caraya	Small troop on the Paraguay River and a larger troop on two occasions at the Ibera Wetlands.
25	Azara's Capuchin	Sapajus cay	Two brief views at Laguna Blanca.
26	Azara's Night Monkey	Aotus azarae	Group of three or four at Defensores del Chaco.
27	Small Fat-tailed Opossum	Thylamys pusillus	One at night on foot at Fortin Toledo.
28	Grey Four-eyed Opossum	Philander opossum	Individual at Los Tres Gigantes.
29	Yellow Armadillo	Euphractus sexcinctus	Regularly observed in the Chaco and one brief sighting at the Ibera Wetlands.
30	Nine-banded Armadillo	Dasypus novemcinctus	Two on a night walk at the Ibera Wetlands.
31	Southern Three-banded Armadillo	Tolypeutes matacus	Routinely observed across the Chaco.
32	Screaming Hairy Armadillo	Chaetophractus vellerosus	One by its burrow at Laguna Capitan.
33	Large Hairy Armadillo	Chaetophractus villosus	Five or six in one specific area on the drive towards Teniente Enciso.
34	Tapeti	Sylvilagus brasiliensis	Common at several destinations.
35	Capybara	Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris	Seen in the Chaco and abundant at the Ibera Wetlands.
36	Plains Viscacha	Lagostomus maximus	Several small colonies at Teniente Enciso.
37	Chacoan Mara	Dolichotis salinicola	Common at several destinations within the Gran Chaco.
38	Brazilian Guinea Pig	Cavia aperea	One on the drive to Pirahu and multiple sightings at the Ibera Wetlands.
39	Common Yellow-toothed Cavy	Galea musteloides	Several sightings at Fortin Toledo and Teniente Enciso.

40	Azara's Agouti	Dasyprocta azarae	One at the side of the road at Bahia Negra.
41	Black Rat	Rattus rattus	Several at Mbaracayu Forest Nature Reserve.
42	Chacoan Pygmy Rice Rat	Oligoryzomys chacoensis	Two or three sightings at Fortin Toledo.
43	Chaco Leaf-eared Mouse	Graomys chacoensis	Individual while spotlighting near Mariscal Estigarribia.
44	South American Water Rat	Nectomys squamipes	One swimming in very clear water at the side of the road near Laguna Salada.
45	Paraguayan Rice Rat	Sooretamys angouya	Two at Mbaracayu Forest Nature Reserve.
46	Lesser Bulldog Bat	Noctilio albiventris	Large numbers hunting across the water and beside our boat at Los Tres Gigantes.
47	Greater Round-eared Bat	Tonatia bidens	A small colony roosting in an abandoned building at Defensores del Chaco.
48	Common Vampire Bat	Desmodus rotundus	A colony roosting in a dead tree at Teniente Enciso.
49	Diminutive Brown Bat	Eptesicus diminutus	A low number roosting under a concrete bridge at Pirahu.
50	Silver-tipped Myotis	Myotis albescens	Two roosting at the boat house at Laguna Blanca.


Chile
Baritu
Paraguay
Paraguay
Calilegua
El Ray
Andes
Rio Pilcomayo
Cardones
Iguazu
Copo
Chaco
San Guillermo
Mburucuya
Posadas
Ibera Wetlands
Brazil
Talampaya
Ischigualasto
Cordoba
El Palmar
Mendoza
Rosario
Uruguay
Buenos Aires
Argentina
Chile
Lihue Calel
Lanin
Bahia Blanca
South Atlantic
Negro
Nahuel Huapi
Los Alerces
Valdes Peninsula
South Pacific
Chubut
Rawson
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Los Glaciares
El Calafate
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