Chile: Walking with Pumas 2022 September tour 2

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There are some wildlife experiences so exquisite that to witness them is to feel a rush of privilege and wonder – those hold-your-breath moments that become markers in a storied life.

In amongst them – if you're lucky – maybe even a handful of times when you transcend from mere onlooker; where there is almost a crossover, an acceptance from a powerful wild animal that you can not only stay, but perhaps journey alongside them for a while. Not just observing them in their dominion, but briefly part of it too.

And there, in a nutshell, is what has customarily made the Wild Images 'Walking with Pumas' tour so very special. In our second September 2022 tour, just like the one immediately preceding it, we not only came within a few feet of the great mountain lion of the Americas, but moved in lockstep with, and in company of, these incredible animals.

On one occasion, we kept abreast with a normally solitary female as she wandered down from her cave in a narrow escarpment, pausing alongside us to sit in front of mountains streaked with blue shadows, before heading onwards towards a previous day's kill.

And the time we walked beside a female puma and her cubs through a valley clearing, whereupon she leapt atop a large boulder and posed as an empress surveying her realm.

On a further morning – already noted for its stunning palette of orange and pink sunlight – we stood as another set of cubs bounded through the calafate shrub towards us; a male cub moving to then walk cheek-by-cheek with his mother. A moment of genuine beauty and so close that we felt we could almost reach out and touch it.

As if such experiences with these normally elusive big cats were not enough, the stronghold for these mountain lions is backdropped by the peaks of Patagonia's iconic Torres del Paine National Park. With its dramatic spires in shades of dark and grey (sedimentary rock overlaid with granite) Patagonia sees your mountains and raises them, inimitable bookends in an already epic sweep of landscape.

If a wild animal could possibly choose a more magnificent or – for photography purposes, more picturesque – hunting ground, many of us are yet to see it. So not only were we able to search for, and walk with, pumas in an area known for having probably the highest concentration of these incredible big cats anywhere in the world, we did so in a region of unrivalled scenery. Not a bad foundation for any wildlife tour!

WELCOME TO PATAGONIA

Our tour began in Punta Arenas, a city whose bawling weather and drawn-out, sweeping shoreline accompany its edge-of-a-continent feel.

Situated on the Brunswick Peninsula of the Magellan Strait, the city not only serves as a gateway for modern Antarctic exploration but also reverberates with the echoes of past adventurers, most notably Sir Earnest Shackleton and Ferdinand Magellan, after whom the region is named.

In its museums and street art, Punta Arenas also rightly pays homage to its canoe-faring indigenous people, such as the Kawésqar, who navigated this strait (a vital passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans) long before any western expeditions.

At our hotel, near the city's pier with its flocks of Imperial Cormorants and Dolphin Gulls, we shared our first dinner with our wonderful Chilean co-guide Jorge Valenzuela, a gifted naturalist.

ANDEAN CONDORS – SOUTH AMERICA'S GREAT MESSENGER OF THE SKIES

If pumas are the Chilean Andes' land predator in chief, then the Andean Condor is its lord of the skies. These vast birds, believed by the Inca Empire to carry the dead to the afterlife on their wings, never failed to impress us whenever they soared overhead.

Before journeying north towards Torres del Paine and our puma tracking ground, we spent a day at Estancia Olga Teresa, host to what is believed to be the world's most accessible condor roost.

As many as 200 Andean Condors roost communally along the estancia's towering cliff ridge, becoming more active towards the afternoon and riding the thermals for hours at a time with barely a wing-flap.

Considered the largest flying bird in the world by combined measurement of wingspan and weight (full adult wingspans can approach 11ft) to see these vultures effortlessly soar both beneath and above us, was to witness a species perfectly attuned for Patagonia's windswept conditions.

And as far as photographic experiences go, it is a rewarding one. Wait just a few minutes and a condor will come. And by the afternoon, both the valley beneath the ridge and the sky above, were full of these splendid birds.

Both the male and females share black-and-white upper wing patterns, with males sporting a comb, large neck wattle and yellow/brown rather than red eyes. Juveniles are distinctive too, with greyish-brown feathers and a brown ruff.

In between our time at the condor ridge, we had coffee in a small outdoor clearing, surrounded by trees covered in mistletoe and lichen. Jose, from the estancia, gave us a tour of the ranch stables, woolshed and of his particularly large 'pet' sheep, whose brothers had allegedly all been taken by a puma.

Driving north along the road that heads up to the Pacific end of the Strait of Magellan, we also saw many of the birds that would become familiar throughout our tour. In the inlet, Magellanic Oystercatchers, Upland and Ashy-headed Geese by the shore. In the water, Flightless Steamer Ducks and regal Black-necked Swans.

And in the meadows, the endemic Lesser Rhea, Black-chested Buzzard Eagles and Crested Caracaras on a carcass, then the beautiful Long-tailed Meadowlark, Austral Negrita, Rufous collared sparrow, red-backed Austral Negrito and Scale-throated Earthcreeper.

On a fence, as we returned for more condors, a Chilean Flicker emerged in front of us – just one of many sightings in a day of avian spectacle.

HEADING NORTH TO THE MOUNTAINS AND OUR PUMA TRACKING BASE

Given that the weather forecast for our tour had been rather foreboding, predicting rain and limpid light, we were instead gifted dry, clear days that showcased the stunning mountains of the Paine Massif.

One of the two possible exceptions being, firstly, the blustery day of our drive from Punta Arenas, north to Puerto Natales and then to the estancia that would become our home for seven nights. And on another morning, while trying to photograph pumas feeding from a kill, the wind was so strong that some of us had to kneel to steady our cameras.

Puerto Natales, home to one of the best pizza restaurants in Chilean Patagonia (at which we duly lunched) has the feel of an outdoor-lovers town. Out by the jetty lap the waters of the Last Hope Sound. In the distance stand some of the last representatives of the Andes Mountains, before the range finally ends its 5,000-mile continent-conquering reign, continuing only hidden, beneath the sea.

Here we also got our first look at the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, straddling the border of Patagonia and Chile. Totalling more than 6,000 square miles in area, it's one of the largest non-polar glaciers on Earth.

Heading onwards from Puerto Natales, the road arcs inland, becoming all grand curves amid more mountainous terrain. Our base for the following week – Estancia El Ovejero, in the small farming settlement of Cerro Castillo. The warmth of this estancia and its staff (not to forget their excellent wines) became a source of daily happiness throughout our tour.

PUMAS – IN SEARCH OF PATAGONIA'S INCREDIBLE MOUNTAIN LIONS

And so began our days tracking the Patagonian Puma – technically *Puma concolor puma,* according to the most recent taxonomic revision of Cats (Felidae).

Guided by our tracker, the talented biologist and puma specialist Jorge, our mornings typically started at 6.15am, with a drive out into the reserve that is home to one of the highest concentrations of pumas in the world.

Our tracking ground – the 6,200 hectare Laguna Amarga reserve, a private land which enabled us the freedom to walk off-trail, a privilege not permitted in the bordering Torres del Paine National Park.

With its healthy prey base of guanacos, and an estimated 20-30 most frequently seen cats, there is no better place in the world where wildlife-lovers can walk so closely alongside a wild puma, if accompanied by an experienced tracker and if the cat itself permits it.

Of course, the puma itself recognises no such boundaries. On several days we saw both pumas and guanacos jumping the border fence from the national park, often favouring the distinct sandstone rock conglomerates and cave systems of the reserve and the hunting grounds of Lake Goic and 'Central Valley' to the park behind.

The puma's Latin name means 'cat of one colour', which stands at odds to the fact that coat colours can vary a great deal, from brown to rufous to the pale grey of cubs, together with a sandy hue that enables these cats to camouflage well amidst the Patagonian shrub.

Even the puma's name can be an evasive one. Named and renamed constantly in different countries and by native peoples, this species has accumulated almost 80 different appellations – more than any other animal.

From 'mountain lion' to 'cougar', 'catamount' to 'red tiger', this elusiveness has only added to the air of mystery around the cat.

Tracking a puma on foot can be an exhilarating but exhausting endeavour. There are so many caves, rocks and areas of vegetation, such as the prickly shrubs 'Mata Negra', 'Mata Verosa' and 'Calafate' in which these animals can hide. We became so used to picking small thorns out of our trousers that we joked that all the plants in the reserve were conspiring to attack us!

And then there's the fact that pumas can move great distances to go hunting at night, and also blend in so well with their surroundings. Often, it was the flash of a puma's white underbelly or chin that finally gave them away. Although the most sure-fire way of finding a puma is after they are 'outed' by their prey – the well-organised guanacos with sentinel watchmen who 'neigh' if they see or smell their feared hunters.

Most days we would begin by heading west along the shores of the 14-mile-long Lake Sarmiento, itself dominated by the majestic Cordillera del Paine mountains, with its centrepiece the iconic Torres (towers).

From there, with Jorge Cardenas tracking ahead of us, we would either scan along the fossil-like formations of thrombolites and stromatolites beside both Lake Sarmiento and Lake Goic, head up into the 'Central Valley' region strewn with guanaco bones, or further into the hunting grounds flanked by a series of rock conglomerates.

A REAL INSIGHT INTO PUMA BEHAVIOUR

One of the best features of the Wild Images 'Walking with Pumas' tour is the relatively high number of days devoted to tracking and photographing these mountain lions. And on this particular tour, we bore witness to some incredible behaviour.

There was the haunting sound of a female puma, 'Coiron', calling after picking up the scent of the reserve's dominant male, 'Dark'. Part guttural growl, part elongated scream, we stood silently as the large male puma suddenly appeared through the shadows behind her. In fading light – and after we had spent time earlier that day photographing 'Coiron' as she groomed and slept by us on a rocky ledge – it was spellbinding to observe some of the rituals that precede any mating behaviour.

And then there are the behaviours that illustrate just how difficult it is to survive as a puma in this wilderness. Guanaco hunts fail nine times out of ten because the camelids are both so big and so effective at warning calls. Not to mention the fact that one kick in the head

from a guanaco can be fatal.

The puma behavioural trait of sharing a kill – whether it stems from a necessary reciprocity in order to survive, or represents some other social function – was one we observed on several occasions.

There was the day we snoozed in warm sunshine in pampas grass just metres away from a sleeping 'Petaka' and her cubs, who had, just the previous evening, taken ownership of fellow female puma 'Sol's' guanaco kill. Between 'Sol' intermittently searching and calling for her lost male cub (whom she later found) Petaka kept a continuous half-awake eye on the carcass, 'permitting' Sol just one meal at her own kill; growling and hissing when she deemed the thwarted puma had taken enough.

We also got an insight into the efforts that go into both making a successful kill and hiding it from the scores of either scavengers – condors, black-chested buzzard eagles and caracaras – or predators – foxes and, not to mention other pumas – that also seek to feed on guanaco remains.

We watched on as the female puma 'Ginger' left a nearly finished kill to go hunting again, her eyes zeroing on a guanaco that had just jumped the boundary fence from the Torres del Paine National Park into the reserve. She dropped low and started her crawling advance, trying to avoid detection by the sentinel guanaco stationed above the line of vegetation. Until her efforts were finally foiled by a third guanaco who signalled the alarm.

So many of these encounters provided fantastic photographic opportunities and we were incredibly fortunate in having a guide who was both highly ethical and with a deep love and understanding for these intelligent animals. And tracking on foot gave an intimacy of experience that, as one group member put it, 'has redefined for her what a wildlife tour should be.'

TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK AND A WEALTH OF OTHER WILDLIFE

On most days, after a full morning spent tracking or staying with any pumas we found, we headed into the Torres del Paine National Park, looking for birds and other wildlife among its panorama of outstanding peaks and startlingly blue lakes.

Between stop-points such as Laguna Azul or Lake Pehoe, or by patches of Southern Beech woods, we saw Andean Condors and both Crested and Striated Caracaras feasting on a large carcass, presumed to be a puma kill.

On other days, there were flocks of Black-faced Ibis and Austral Parakeets, a Pygmy Owl half-sleeping on a nearby tree, and a Patagonian scorpion trying to rest under rocks. Not to mention many other bird species from Great Grebes to Chilean Flamingos on mudflats, Andean Ruddy Ducks and Chilean Wigeons.

Leaving the park, we had several sightings of the South American Grey Fox, one of Patagonia's other notable mammalian predators.

For landscape photography fans, this tour did not disappoint either. From the reflections of the Paine Massif in Laguna Amarga or the spectacular Lake Nordenskjöld – to the mist that swirled around the peaks of Los Cuernos ('The Horns') as we drove fully through the Torres del Paine National Park on our last full day, we were gifted some awe-inspiring views of the beauty of Patagonia.

Leaving the reserve on our last day, we made our way through the park and back up to Puerto Natales and then Punta Arenas. We had coffee looking out at the stunning Lake Grey, before a walk to the Grey Glacier, where floating light-blue icebergs glittered in the sunlight.

As we left, many of the group said they had a feeling of genuine privilege to have been able to walk so closely alongside (and photograph) wild pumas – moments that both resonate with me and are ones to surely treasure for years to come.