Chile: Walking with Pumas 2023 April Tour Report

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Punta Arenas

Our tour started with a delicious dinner in the comfortable hotel in Punta Arenas. Punta Arenas is the capital city of Chile's southernmost region, Magallanes, and the city serves as a port for some of Antarctica's cruise ships. Along the shoreline of Punta Arenas' beaches, it's easy to find several species of birds like Crested Ducks, Chiloe Wigeons, Southern Lapwings, Kelp Gulls, and Dolphin Gulls. Due to the extreme southern location of Punta Arenas in Chile and it's almost Sub-Antarctic latitude, the Southern Giant Petrel is a regular sight here. Exploring the coastline on foot we found an old wooden wharf with lots of Imperial Shags and these, along with a good variety of other birds, allowed us to kick-start our tour's photography with a diversity of avian delights.

Andean Condors

Early the next morning we met our local guide who was both very experienced and always in good spirits. Together we made our way to a remote estancia south of Punta Arenas to continue with our avian odyssey. It is here that we go to photography the iconically beautiful Andean Condor.

As we travelled towards the estancia before dawn, we caught a glimpse of a Patagonian skunk beside the road, our first Patagonian mammal and a very special one as we don't see these on every trip to Patagonia.

The area of the estancia contains a big cliff which is used by sometimes up to 200 Andean condors as a roosting place. We arrived at first light and the wind was so strong, it sometimes made even the walking difficult for our guests. To get the best photos while keeping our cameras stable we decided it was favorable to crouch behind a rock to get some protection from the wind. We didn't have to wait for long. Soon the first condors started to fly and it was fascinating to see how these huge and heavy birds use the wind to soar without moving their wings.

We saw several birds of different ages, both females and males. In the first six years Andean Condors have a different plumage each year before they have the appearance of the adult birds so it was wonderful to photograph and study these different plumage colours in these magnificent birds.

Despite the wind we scaled a small hill and stood on the top of a cliff so that we sometimes had view on the condors from above or at eye level, but after two hours we were rather frozen in the cold wind, so when the activity of the condors lowered, so did we and we went off in search of other birds to photograph in the surroundings.

We checked a good place for the Magellanic horned owl, but sadly we didn't find one. We did, however, see lots of Upland Geese, a Magellanic Snipe and we had an unusual sighting of two Yellow-bridled finches which were unusual to see in that area.

At noon we had our packed lunch sitting on the benches of the estancia and the owners kindly gave us coffee and biscuits to help us warm up while we were, surrounded by the pretty lichen-covered trees of the estancia grounds.

In the afternoon we returned to the condor cliff. Back in the wind, there was more condor activity than in the morning which gave us better opportunities for photos.

The Andean condor is Chile's national bird with an impressive wingspan up to 3,3 m (10 ft 10) and weight of 15 kg. Sometimes they fly 100 or 200 kilometers to feed on a carcass and return later back to the roosting cliff. Spending a full day with them is almost always a highlight to the start of our puma tours.

Leaving for Torres Del Paine

The next day we had a long drive to the Puma area near the Torres del Paine National Park. Along the way we stopped to take photos of Southern Caracaras, Black-chested Buzzard-eagles, Black-necked Swans and Coscoroba Swans.

We enjoyed lunch in a pizza restaurant during our break in Puerto Natales. In the afternoon we reached the western part of the Torres del Paine National Park. This incredible reserve with its landscapes of mountain peaks and lakes is breathtaking and during our tour the trees were already showing the beautiful reds of the southern hemisphere autumn.

Torres del Paine's breathtaking scenery unfolded before our eyes so we stopped to photograph the snow-covered mountains and blue lakes. Along the entrance road we found an Austral Owl, the smallest Chilean owl species, and we were lucky that this tiny owl let us approach to a photo distance.

Finally, we reached our cozy accommodation where we met our talented tracker who has a vast knowledge about the pumas and has spent a lot of time in the field studying these cats.

Seven days on foot with wild Pumas

The following day our exciting time of Puma tracking began. For the next seven days our daily routine started early with a pre-dawn drive to the best areas we could find Pumas. Our tracker went out even earlier than we did so we could be in the best place at dawn to scan the hills and mountains for our much sought-after Pumas. You often need some time to find a Puma as the behavior of each cat is very individual. Some of them are shy while others are more relaxed in the presence of people. Luckily the pumas are well protected in Torres Del Paine, so they don't normally fear human hunters. In contrast to the adjacent Torres del Paine National Park, we were free to leave the paths in our first location, which enabled us to get much better photos. Our experienced tracker is one of the finest in Torres del Paine and he knows the best places and the behavior of the pumas in a place that is currently the best in the world to get good images of wild mountain lions. Both for safety and avoidance of disturbance of the wild animals, the tracker in combination with only a small group of people are essential. The most activity happens in the time of before dawn and early morning and then again in the late afternoon and evening until after dusk so we were always out during these times to search for this majestic cat. During the times where Puma activity was low, we went off in search of other photography subjects including some of the region's wildlife and, of course, the spectacular scenery of the area.

Our first Puma encounter

On our first morning we stopped along the way into the park to photograph the impressive towers of the Torres del Paine mountains at the first glow of sunrise. Soon afterwards we heard the typical alarm calls of a Guanaco. We finally found our first Puma! It was very hidden in the dense scrub and covered a guanaco kill with plants to hide it from other predators and scavengers like caracaras or grey foxes. So, our first encounter was thrilling, but not the best photographic opportunity, since the Puma decided to lie down in the dense bushes.

Instead, we took some photos of landscapes in the nearby Torres del Paine National Park and some of us had a nice encounter with a fantastic male Long-tailed Meadowlark sporting his beautiful red breast feathers.

In the afternoon we decided to return to the carcass, and as we hoped, the puma began to be active again. He went to the kill but sadly while he fed on it, he was nearly invisible. Wildly we were actually close enough to hear him eating and chewing on the bones of his Guanaco! He finally began to prowl away from his carcass and allowing us to finally capture our first good Puma images when he raised his head out of the bushes.

This encounter was the first of our extraordinary 14 Puma encounters on the tour, including seeing some Pumas several times, many of which were really photogenic.

Witness of an attempted Puma hunt

On one morning we watched a female Puma named "Sol" while she followed a group of Guanacos. It seemed obvious that she was trying to hunt them. We found out that "Sol" had a sub-adult cub, so she had to hunt every few days. We watched her stalking a group of Guanacos, sometimes getting to a close distance of about 25 m to them she crouched behind a bush and waited attentively, her whole body tensed. We watched this scene for more than an hour, all with our cameras ready for action. Finally, before coming to a distance for

an ambush, one Guanaco discovered her and gave an alarm call. Her cover revealed, “Sol” gave up at once. Although she was still close to the guanacos, she knew that the game was over. It was very exciting to be witness of an attempt to hunt. In daytime, the majority of Puma hunts are not successful. Pumas ambush their prey from a short distance, they don’t like to run after their prey. In Torres Del Paine, their main prey is the Guanaco, but as an opportunist a Puma will hunt other available prey, also, such as hares, South American Grey Foxes or even birds.

The Alpha male “Dark”

One day, as we photographed “Sol” from a distance lying on a hill, we heard an alarm call of a Guanaco in the distance. Our experienced local guide discovered the huge Puma male named “Dark” in the far distance. We were lucky as this is the alpha male for this huge area and it is not common to find him. “Dark” is by far the biggest Puma to find in Torres Del Paine and he is the father to most of the cubs. His coloration is an unusually dark grey, which makes him very well camouflaged between rocks and vegetation with very similar colors. We caught a glimpse of his intense stare and we all stood in awe of this huge male Puma that is estimaged to weigh well over 80 kilograms. We tried to get closer by walking down a pretty steep hill, but when we arrived we only had a quick opportunity to take photos of this impressive cat, before he started to climb up another hill. What an adventure! It is estimated that “Dark” is now about ten years old and maybe soon there will be another male trying to challenge him and take over the role of the alpha male, but for now we all felt very lucky to meet such an infamous cat of this area.

Our first meeting with a young Puma cub

One afternoon, we got a radio call that our tracker had found three Pumas and this developed into one of our best encounters of the tour. The pumas we approached were the female “Rupestre” together with her subadult cub and her cute small four-month-old cub! It was fantastic. “Rupestre” was really relaxed, so we were able to quietly approach her and reach a good photographic distance. She and her cubs were all were feeding on a kill which was hidden under a bush. Staying with them, we managed to get images of interactions between the pumas, especially when the adorable cub playing with the mother. We watched her cub jumping on its mother’s neck and play fighting. Play like this is good training for skills which later will be important like hunting. The mother was grooming and licking her young. All of us were mesmerised to see such an incredibly young Puma cub and photograph the intimate moments between them. Finally and surprisingly, just after feeding on the kill “Rupestre” saw a South American Grey Fox and started a new hunt. It was a short and fast pursuit without success.

During our tour this was the only known young cub in the whole area. Maybe the rough weather conditions of the last winter led to declining fertility rates. Born blind, the cubs are completely dependent on their mother at first. Initially they have black spots, at the age of about three to four months the fur becomes single-colored brown. They are weaned at three months and start visiting kills. The cubs will stay together with its mother for one and a half to two years.

After watching and photographing the cub and its mother for such a long time, everybody was so excited that they couldn’t wait to check their images after dinner.

Five Pumas together

In the afternoon of the next day, we experienced another highlight when we went to photograph a gathering of no less than five Pumas! We followed the female “Petaka” with her sub-adult cub and after a while they met up with the female Puma “Blinka” with her two (around) 15-month-old cubs. Seeing the five of them together was a really unusual sighting! At one point, four of them all set together in a row in a near perfect photographic pose! We all captured incredible images of that extraordinary scene. All of the pumas obviously knew each other and were completely peaceful like a big family.

In many books it is written that pumas are solitary animals, however, recent research on mountain lions revealed that they are much more social than expected and today definitely proved that point.

We spent some hours with these Pumas until after sunset. In the last light we all could get some silhouetted images of the cats with the spectacular mountains of the Torres del Paine massif in the background – yet another amazing photographic highlight.

A whole day with Pumas at a kill

After a less productive day with rain and storm the last day of puma tracking was a success again. As the tour got closer to the end, early one morning we found a Puma feeding on a guanaco kill. It was “Rupestre”, the mother of the young cub, again. This time the kill was located in the open, so we managed to have very good views of this scene. After a while, the puma started to cover the carcass with plants to hide it. She had already sighted some condors, Southern Caracaras and a Black-chested Buzzard-eagle soaring over, all of them obviously interested in a Guanaco breakfast, but in the presence of a mountain lion,none of them dared to land. While “Rupestre” vanished, probably to take her cubs to the kill, another Puma appeared on stage. This new mountain lion sat for a minute in an incredible spot that allowed us to photograph it with the towers of Torres del Paine massif in the background – a photo that every wildlife photographer dreams of. While we photographed that Puma feeding on the kill, we could see another three Pumas approaching from a distance. “Rupestre” had returned with her cubs. What would the first Puma do when another cat appears to feed? There was only a short snarl at the arriving cats, showing a gesture of submission. Thereafter a second Puma was invited to share the meal, which was a great example of the social behavior of this species. Later, all of the pumas started to alternately feed on the Guanaco kill and our group members all made lots of photos of the cute cub gnawing at a rib. Rain finally forced us to leave and when we returned to our accommodation, all of us had tons of photos on our memory cards.

Other highlights

While the main focus of our tour is Pumas, Torres Del Paine, with its stunning scenery and amazing diversity of wildlife meant that we managed to capture an amazing portfolio of different subjects on the trip. The landscapes of Torres Del Paine are spectacular and since we spent a lot of time outdoors, we had some excellent opportunities to photograph beautiful mountains and lakes in a good light. During April the reddish leaves of autumn were a welcome addition. Even at times when we have not been in the nearby National Park, the famous towers of the Torres del Paine massif are often visible from elsewhere, providing a spectacular background for wildlife photography. In the National Park itself there are much more impressive mountains, torrents and lakes.

Most of the smaller migratory birds had already left the area in March as in Patagonia the cold weather starts early, but we still had some good sightings of different birds like Southern Caracaras, White-throated Caracaras, Black-chested Buzzard-eagles, Lesser Rheas, Upland Geese, Long-tailed Meadowlarks and many more. As an avian highlight of the tour, we were able to photograph both the smallest and the biggest of the Chilean owls, the Austral Pygmy Owl and the Magellanic Horned Owl.

On several occasions we had great situations with Guanacos. Fortunately, these are quite common in the area which also enables a higher Puma population. Since the Puma is the only predator for the Guanacos, they usually have one guard watching out for the enemy from the top of the hill while the other members of the group are grazing. As such, we photographed Guanacos in front of impressive mountains and even jumping over a fence at one point.

We were lucky this tour as we found two large Hairy Armadillos foraging inside a big, fenced pasture. To our surprise, they allowed us to approach them quite closely. The most difficult part of photographing these cute creatures was that their heads were particularly hidden most time while they was searching for food in the ground. Even so, it was nice to get photos of these strange, almost prehistoric looking mammals.

Altogether, our tour was a huge success, especially with our encounters with Puma cubs, groups of Pumas, attempted hunt and feeding on a kill encounters.