Chile: Walking With Pumas 2023 September Tour Report

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by Virginia Wilde

An unseasonal blanket of heavy snow during the Wild Images September 2023 'Walking With Pumas' tour set the stage for some of the most atmospherically beautiful wildlife encounters in years.

I increasingly believe that there are few wildlife destinations on Earth that rival Patagonia on the combined strength of two specific factors. One, on the sheer magnificence of its landscapes; dramatic backdrops that give way to the kind of widescreen wildlife 'environmental' images that are almost always more than the sum of their parts.

And two, for the unadulterated 'wildness' of its wildlife. Which, although seemingly self-evident (by definition) the reality is often more of a compromise: human / wildlife interactions cannot always be as unalloyed as we may wish.

Patagonia offers wildlife that is neither corralled nor contained; constrained only by the geographical features that carve up its great landmass. Add into this the enigmatic puma: Patagonia's undisputed wilderness king and great mountain lion of the Americas, and you have a thunderous mix.

To walk alongside these normally-elusive cats, as they roam the steppes and lower reaches of this enduringly spectacular terrain, never fails to be an intimate and frequently moving experience.

Highlights on our September tour – when the snow first softened, then amplified, the bone structure of the landscape – included a young female puma locking eyes and padding towards us, stopping just feet away as the snowflakes fell silently around her.

Then the still beauty of a huge herd of guanacos, slowly picking their way through the snow drifts.

Add to this the privilege of spending three hours walking alongside one of the region's most iconic pumas as she hunted hares – before cresting a ridge to see this huntress look out onto her mountain realm.

Not to mention a breath-holding encounter with 'Dark', the region's alpha male puma, and an evening spent closely watching two seven-month old cubs, as they feasted on a fresh guanaco kill.

Our puma-tracking days were based in the vast private reserve of Laguna Amarga – home to one of the highest concentrations of pumas in the world.

Based in the environs of the Torres del Paine National Park, whose majestic peaks are often set ablaze by the furious violets and reds of the Patagonian sunrise and sunsets, the reserve offers both protection and an accessible tracking ground for these mountain lions.

Even when in the reserve, however, the pumas themselves recognise no such boundaries. We frequently saw both felines and guanacos jumping the border fences from the national park – favouring the sandstone rock conglomerates, lakes and cave systems of Laguna Amarga to hunt, or, in the case of the guanacos, to graze.

On this year's tour, not one day passed without impressive puma sightings, and some days we had multiple close encounters with these captivating animals.

THE TOUR BEGINS: PUNTA ARENAS, PATAGONIA'S WINDSWEPT CITY OF EXPLORERS

Our tour kicked off in Punta Arenas on a day when the weather decided to throw its bawling worst at us. Thankfully, the torrential rain hammering the city's shoreline along the Strait of Magellan, was, by far, the worst of the trip.

As the world's largest city south of the 46th parallel (south), Punta Arenas echoes with the stories of Antarctic explorers from days gone by. Most notably, these include Sir Earnest Shackleton and Ferdinand Magellan, after whom the region is named.

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

Despite the rain, bird species such as Imperial Cormorants, Southern Lapwings, Kelp and Dolphin Gulls, were easy to spot along the shoreline, right in front of our hotel.

ANDEAN CONDORS, OWLS, AND OUR FIRST ARMADILLO

Before journeying north to begin our puma tracking, we spent a day in search of Patagonia's lord of the skies: the ever-impressive Andean Condor.

But first we were joined by Mauricio, our local Chilean co-guide – whose wildlife knowledge, coupled with a winning sense of humour and charm – made him such great company for the whole tour.

As the night's leaden skies began to clear, we headed towards Estancia Olga Teresa at first light, home to what is believed to be the world's most accessible condor roost. Recent counts show that as many as 200 Andean Condors roost communally along the estancia's cliff ridges and crevices.

Considered the largest flying bird in the world – by combined measurement of wingspan and weight – Andean Condors are not only a national symbol of Chile, but were believed, by the Incas, to carry the dead to the afterlife on their wings.

Certainly, to see these vast vultures soar effortlessly overhead, riding the thermals, is to witness a bird perfectly suited to Patagonia's windswept conditions.

Yet herein lay the problem for our condor day – it fell on perhaps the LEAST windy day Patagonia has experienced in a long, long, time.

Added to this, huge amounts of rainfall had rendered the track up to the cliff roosting site inaccessible to even the toughest 4WD vehicles. The only way up was to tackle the 40-minute uphill walk.

Before meeting this challenge, we checked out a roosting site – known to Mauricio – for the Magellanic Horned Owl. And, Bingo, there were two of these charismatic birds – Patagonia's biggest owl – right there for us to photograph.

To give the wind a chance to pick-up (crucially enabling the condors to fly) we spent an hour driving the coast road along the Seno Skyring – a large inland sound that connects to the Pacific end of the Strait of Magellan through fjords that cut into the Andean Massif.

A good number of bird species were here for us to enjoy: the first of many Black-chested Buzzard Eagles, Crested Caracaras, and some flightless Lesser Rheas in gorgeous morning light. Mauricio was incredibly excited about our sighting of a bright-blue billed Andean Duck, a bird rarely recorded this far south.

Other birding finds, down on the lapping waves of the inlet, included pairs of Upland Geese and the endemic Ashy-headed Goose; the handsome Flightless Steamer Duck, Magellanic Oystercatchers and small flocks of handsome Black-necked Swans. On our return to the estancia, we celebrated our first glimpse of a Large Hairy Armadillo, scuttling across the fields.

After slowly climbing the estancia's famous 'Condor Cliff', we positioned ourselves on the wide top ledge, to await the show. And, sure enough, one-by-one, these magnificent birds started to soar by – sometimes passing us almost at eye-level and sometimes plunging from the sky, talons out, to land on the ledges and crevices of the rock.

Andean Condors take on a different plumage each year, for the first six years of their lives. This sees their colouration transform, from the rich mottled browns of their juvenile form, to the striking black and white plumage of adulthood. So it's wonderful to be able to photograph these birds in all these morphing stages.

Both the male and females share the distinctive black-and-white upper wing patterns, with males sporting a comb, large neck wattle and yellow/brown (rather than the female red eyes.)

For more than two hours we stayed on the cliff, photographing condors both as portraits, as they rested on the cliff, and in action mode, as they soared past. The way condors glide seems almost effortless, flapping their wings sometimes just once an hour, with the fingers on their wingtips enabling them to make fine adjustments to their flight path. Full adult wingspans can reach 11ft and Andean Condors

can live for up to 75 years.

As we made our way back down the cliff, to head back to Punta Arenas for the night, other bird species revealed themselves. We had our first flash of the beguiling red-chested Long-tailed Meadowlark, together with the ever-cheerful Rufous-collared Sparrow, Bar-winged Cinclodes, and the aptly-named Fire-eyed Diucon.

JOURNEYING NORTH TOWARDS TORRES DEL PAINE AND 'PUMA LAND'

Although pumas are to be found all over Patagonia, nowhere are they believed to be more prevalent than in the Laguna Amarga reserve – a vast private estate that provides us the freedom to walk off-trail with these wild cats, a privilege not permitted in the neighbouring Torres del Paine National Park.

To get to our puma-tracking destination, we first headed north from Punta Arenas to the outdoor-lover's city of Puerto Natales, stopping to search (in vain, on this particular day) for the rare wader, the Magellanic Plover.

Driving into Puerto Natales, we were welcomed by the city's famous statue of the Mylodon – a giant prehistoric ground sloth whose remains were found in nearby caves. From here, the first glimpse of Patagonia's soaring peaks across the water of the Last Hope Sound: dramatic mountains that climb upwards before sharply nose-diving, seemingly into the waves.

These are the mountains that make up the southerly extension of the 5,000 mile long Andes. Between them, the Southern Patagonian Ice Field is visible: the largest of the South American ice fields and home to some of the fastest flowing glaciers in the world.

The wind had picked up again since yesterday's gust-less aberration, so we spent a little time along the shoreline and jetty, photographing Coscoroba and Black-necked Swans in the waves, before having lunch at one of the best pizza restaurants in Patagonia. From there, we pressed onwards towards the small farming settlement of Cerro Castillo that would become our base for the tour.

En route, we stopped to photograph a gorgeous Great Grebe diving on a lake, and – while the light held – made a successful side excursion to look for Hairy Armadillo and Humboldt's Hog-Nosed Skunk. Some clients even managed to get some shots of both mammals, as Mauricio and I tried to position our 4WD vehicles safely.

Before the day faded completely, we made it to our cozy and warm estancia – with its lovely staff and amazing wines – that would be our base for the next seven days. And over dinner, a welcome from the charismatic Jorge – quite simply, one of the best puma experts in Patagonia, and our personal tracker for the tour.

PUMA TRACKING BEGINS – IN SEARCH OF PATAGONIA'S ICONIC MOUNTAIN LIONS

And so began our seven days' tracking the Patagonia Puma (technically *Puma concolor puma,* according to the most recent taxonomic revisions).

Studies since 2007 have indicated a general Patagonian density of 3.4 pumas for every 10,000 hectares. Yet numbers in the Amarga reserve, with its healthy prey base of guanacos, are significantly higher: one area reportedly boasts up to three pumas per square kilometre.

Mountain lions are largely territorial, and, with an estimated 20-30 most frequently seen cats, there is currently no better place in the world than the Amarga reserve for wildlife lovers to walk so closely alongside a wild puma, if accompanied by an experienced tracker and if the cat itself permits it.

The puma's Latin name means 'cat of one colour' – a misnomer, actually, given that coat colours can vary a great deal, from tawny and rufous to the increasing pale grey colour of cats seen in the reserve, a legacy of 'Dark' the fearsome-looking 'alpha male' whose genes are currently dominating.

Added to this is the fact that pumas have been named and renamed constantly by both native peoples and by explorers to North and South America, amassing, as a result, more than 80 different monikers – more than any other animal. These include: 'cougar', 'mountain lion', 'catamount' and 'red tiger.'

Our puma days typically started at 6am, with a drive into the reserve and a westward turn along the shores of the 14-mile long Lake Sarmiento. Given their level of camouflage, with pale coats blending well with the colours of the Patagonian steppe, the best way of

finding pumas is to monitor the behaviour of their biggest prey – the incredibly canny and well-organised guanaco.

These elegant camelids post 'sentinels' to maintain a watchful eye on their hunters, ready to loudly 'neigh' should the need arise.

In particularly dense shrub areas – where the thorny Calafate and Mata Negra (black shrub) provide perfect cover, and around the strange rock conglomerates beloved by mating pumas – thermal scopes have been a helpful addition for the trackers. In total, we had sightings or encounters with 14 different pumas, with some of the highlights below:

A SUDDEN BLIZZARD AND PUMAS IN THE SNOW

One of our most beautiful puma encounters was also one of our first. It had been a tough first day, with glancing rain that seemed to somehow get everyone more wet than was strictly called for. A steep climb to see two pumas had largely been in vain, with the pair preferring to maintain a good distance from any humans.

As we lunched in the vehicles, looking out over valleys of mist and waiting for the rain to stop, the rain became sleet, which swiftly became snow. At first, the blizzard was absolutely beautiful. We started to head down from our high trail – stopping to photograph a giant herd of guanacos, who were mesmerizingly ghostly as they moved silently through the snow.

Our decision to head back down towards the road had been a good one, but the falling snow had become a heavy blizzard, so for safety reasons, we decided to slowly head back to our estancia – before Jorge spotted two pumas just a few feet away from us.

We pulled over, got out of the vehicles and – for almost an hour – were able to photograph a stunning young female puma, known as 'Escarcha', who padded so close to us that, at one point, we could almost have reached out to touch her. Following her was a young male puma, known as 'Cuevas' (Caves.) To photograph these pumas in the falling snow – and in the fading early evening light – was an almost spiritual experience.

The snow continued to fall all evening and night – with around eight inches on the ground the following day, when the sunrise hit the famous Torres del Paine 'towers' with an almost manically colourful intensity.

WALKING WITH BLINKA AS SHE HUNTED HARES

One of my favourite pumas who chooses to make her home in the reserve is a female known as 'Blinka'. This eight-year-old mountain lion lost her right eye at around three months old and has sustained several injuries since then, one of which still leaves her with a noticeable limp. Despite this, Patagonia's 'Pirate Puma' is a fearsome hunter and incredible mother to her cubs.

On a beautiful blue-sky morning, Jorge and Mauricio found Blinka down by the shores of Lake Sarmiento, and she allowed us to walk alongside her for almost three hours as she simultaneously endeavoured to hunt hares, and rest, in the sunshine.

Some of our most striking images of the trip where taken in the moment that Blinka summited a low-slung hill, with the full range of mountains in the Paine Massif – chiefly Los Cuernos ('The Horns); the Torres ('Towers) and the hulking Almirante Nieto – backdropped behind her. As Blinka finally melted away heading in the direction of these peaks, we considered ourselves privileged to have been able to walk beside her for so long.

CUBS FEASTING ON A FRESHLY-KILLED GUANACO

Many of the pumas that use the reserve as their territory have, over time, been recognised (and named) by the trackers. So it's a special day when new pumas are found that are believed to have never been close to humans at all.

We had the privilege of getting within 40ft of a pair of such unknown cubs, believed to be around seven-months old, as they took turns to feast on a freshly-killed guanaco. As the evening sun began to set – and after we had enjoyed a fantastic close encounter with one of the region's most iconic pumas 'Petaka', down by Lake Sarmiento – we took a chance in returning to a kill site, rather than follow Petaka into the undergrowth.

Our gamble was worth it. Staying low and quiet, we were able to join Jorge behind a cluster of bushes, and watch as both one young cub, and then the second, ate their fill at the guanaco carcass, their mouths ringed red with blood. To see this young pair – whose mother is known to have experienced some prior trauma and stay well away from humans – gambol and play together, was a wonderful

experience.

FOLLOWING 'DARK' AND 'PETAKA' BY THE LAKESIDE

Perhaps the most infamous puma in the region is the dominant male 'Dark' – a brooding, intense-looking puma, cited by most trackers as the one cat in the reserve they are actually fearful of.

Instantly recognisable by his hulking form (he is estimated to weigh in excess of 90kg) and unusually dark grey colouration, I have previously witnessed 'Dark' crunching bones, the sound ricocheting across the valley in a none-too-comforting manner. Now more than ten years old, many of the trackers believe that his era is almost over, with a younger male soon due to be challenging his dominance.

'Dark' is also renowned for being something of a ghost; he is hard to get close to. That said, we were able to follow 'Dark' and 'Petaka' after the two paired up to mate, as the alpha male slowly followed the female along the shoreline of Lake Sarmiento.

We slowly followed the pair for an hour, manoeuvring, as best we could, around the lake's thrombolites (living calcium carbonate fossils that began to form with the last Ice Age around 10,000 years ago, and that grow just one millimetre a year). As Petaka rested on one of the thrombolite outcrops, 'Dark' suddenly appeared behind her, allowing us close-up photographs of this awesome male puma.

YOUNG FEMALE PUMA 'PATAGONA' IN FRONT OF THE ICONIC TORRES DEL PAINE

Our last puma tracking day saw us climbing up to a ridge, where two pumas had been spotted near another recent kill. The previous day had seen half the group spending hours resting near a young male puma 'Brisa', on some high rocks. This scar-faced male likely would have woken to seek a guanaco to hunt – which would have been a fantastic sight – had the bitter Patagonian wind and cold eventually put paid to our ability to stay.

But the following day's climb took us to the always majestic sight of a puma – this time the young female 'Patagona' – resting on rocks, backdropped by the majestic Torres del Paine mountains. At one point, a lone guanaco wandered into this scene, making for a particular poignant image, given that a fellow guanaco carcass lay just metres away.

We watched as Patagona's mother, Blinka, fed on the recent carcass and, after she moved away to rest, turned our attention to the gorgeous sunset colours, which turned the sky behind the mountains a fiery orange. It was a beautiful way to finish our puma tracking days.

PATAGONIA'S CHARISMATIC BIRDS AND THE WONDERS OF THE TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

As well as the pumas, our time in the Laguna Amarga reserve allowed us to photograph some wonderful bird species. My favourite of these were the Black-faced Crested Ibis – although the Magellanic Snipe, Scale-throated Earthcreeper, Crested (Southern) and White-throated Caracaras (together with a variety of ground Tyrants and waterfowl species) were also great finds.

At one point, a flock of Austral Parakeets – the world's most southerly parrot species – flew overhead, together with many condors, Black-chested Buzzard Eagles, a Kestrel and a Cinereous Harrier.

Some tour members were lucky enough to spot a Southern American Grey Fox, one of Patagonia's other notable mammalian predators. On the last full day of the tour, we spent hours in the justifiably world-famous Torres del Paine National Park. This is often a favourite day for landscape-loving clients – who delight in the chance to photograph the reflections of the Paine Massif in Laguna Amarga and in the spectacular Lake Nordenskjold.

We enjoyed coffee with a ridiculously tame Caracara near Lake Pehoe, stopping for a more relaxed coffee and cake experience looking out at the stunning Lake Grey. Some of the group enjoyed the short walk through a strip of Southern Beech Forest, and out onto the shore near the rapidly-disappearing Grey Glacier.

The drive through the national park marked a wonderful end-point to our journey, before stopping once again for pizza in Puerto Natales and heading back to Punta Arenas, at the end of a successful (and startlingly beautiful) puma tracking tour.