

Chile's Pumas & Penguins

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 11th December 2025



King Penguins



Puma



Puma



Torres de Paine

Tour report by Richard and Chloë May



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Tour participants: Juan Ignacio Zuñiga (leader) and Orlando (driver) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

This is a personal trip report by Richard and Chloë May; we supplemented the Pumas and Penguins tour with a post-trip extension from Santiago de Chile. It was a superb trip: the combination of birds, Pumas, scenery, culture and guides was outstanding.

During the time in Torres del Paine, we had seven sightings of five individual Pumas, with opportunities to watch the animals up close and for extended periods, so that we could enjoy their behaviour. We had not expected to be so close to the King Penguin colony on Useless Bay, and it was wonderful having Magellanic Penguins around our feet on Magdalena Island. Other birding highlights were Andean Condors soaring against a backdrop of the snow-topped Andes, Torrent Ducks frenetically paddling in white waters, and Magellanic Woodpeckers feeding on a tree right above our heads. We saw 91 bird species on the main trip, and 153 species including our extension from Santiago.

This was all thanks to the superb guiding, spotting and driving skills of Juan Ignacio and Orlando and, on our extension, Gonzalo Gonzales.

Day 0 and Day 1

Sunday 30th November & Monday 1st December

Flights and overnight stay in Santiago de Chile

We took an overnight flight from London Heathrow to Santiago de Chile, via São Paulo in Brazil. We chose to break up the flights to Punta Arenas, with an overnight stay in Santiago, and were collected from the airport and taken to our hotel in the city centre. We had a walk in a local park in the afternoon and had our first introduction to the birds of Chile.

New birds for the day: Chimango Caracara, Austral Thrush, Yellow-billed Pintail, Rock Dove, Eared Dove, Southern Lapwing, Monk Parakeet, Rufous-tailed Plantcutter, Tufted Tit-tyrant, White-crested Elaenia, Chilean Swallow, Southern House Wren, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Shiny Cowbird, Austral Blackbird.

Day 2

Tuesday 2nd December

Flights to and arrival in Punta Arenas

We were driven to the airport in the morning to join the flight to Punta Arenas with the rest of the group. A scheduled stop in Puerto Montt added Great Egret to the list. We arrived late in the afternoon, the group joined up, and we were met by Juan Ignacio, our guide for the week, and Orlando, our driver, who welcomed us to “the end of world”? We headed for the Diego de Almagro hotel and checked in (while trying to look at birds on the pier through the hotel doors). We just had time to explore the seafront in the thirty minutes before dinner, as dusk fell.

We were told that the boat trip the next day had been cancelled due to bad weather (but it was being rescheduled for the end of the week), so the new plan was to visit a local wetland.

New birds for the day: Flying Steamer Duck, Fuegian (=Flightless) Steamer Duck, Chilean Skua, Dolphin Gull, Kelp Gull, Rock Shag (=Magellanic Cormorant), Imperial Shag, House Sparrow.

Day 3

Wednesday 3rd December

Journey to Torres del Paine

We had a quick walk along the beach before meeting the group for breakfast (adding Southern Giant Petrel, Dark-bellied Cinclodes and South American Tern). We checked out and prepared to start our journey. Unfortunately, an accident just before we set off led to a detour to the local hospital. The rest of the group were taken to a local museum and wetland for the morning. After lunch back at the hotel, the now-delayed journey got underway!

It was a long but beautiful drive through the open pampas, and we stopped several times for birding and to admire the view. We saw our first Lesser Rhea and Guanaco, and had a distant view of Andean Condor. We arrived at Hosteria Pehoe in the dark, so we checked in and went straight for dinner.

New birds for the day: Southern Giant Petrel, Dark-bellied Cinclodes, South American Tern, Upland Goose, Lesser Rhea, Crested Caracara, Crested Duck, Magellanic Plover, Two-banded Plover, Andean Condor, Buff-winged Cinclodes, Austral Negrito, Blue-and-white Swallow, Long-tailed Meadowlark, White-rumped Sandpiper, Silvery Grebe, Black-faced Ibis, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Brown-hooded Gull, American Kestrel, Black-necked Swan, Magellanic Oystercatcher, Great Grebe.

Day 4

Thursday 4th December

Torres del Paine

As we had arrived in the dark, this morning was our first real view of the breathtaking Torres del Paine and the gorgeous location of the hotel. We started early, as dawn and dusk are the most likely times to see Pumas, and drove into the 'Puma Corridor', an area of good habitat which holds a high density of Pumas. We staked out one area with a view over the hillsides, and settled down in the hope that a Puma would pass through. A radio call from our tracker came through, so we drove to meet him, as there had been a sighting of a female, named Pampa, with her cub. The Pumas were resting out of view below a ridge line, but all of a sudden, they appeared behind us on the road! We had a brief view before they disappeared back into cover.

We headed for lunch at one of the national park visitor centres, with a quick dash outside to see some Austral Parakeets. The afternoon started with a drive to a different area of the park, where there was a herd of Guanaco with calves; we hoped that a hungry Puma would be nearby. On the way, we stopped along the river where a male Torrent Duck was frantically swimming and feeding in the churning white waters. We had a short walk and watched the Guanaco with their calves, before hearing of another Puma sighting. We drove over, and had a very distant view of a male Puma crossing a ridge line.

New birds for the day: Lake Duck, Red-gartered Coot, Scale-throated Earthcreeper, White-tufted Grebe, Coscoroba Swan, Yellow-billed Teal, Cinereous Harrier, Spectacled Duck, White-throated Caracara, Fire-eyed Diucon, Austral Parakeet, Black-chinned Siskin, Patagonian Sierra Finch, Chiloe Wigeon, Torrent Duck, Grey-hooded Sierra Finch.

Day 5

Friday 5th December

Torres del Paine

An early pre-breakfast start was very soon rewarded by astonishing views of a female Puma named Repestre, crossing the road in front of our minibus. She settled on the slope very close to the road, so we were able to step out of the minibus and enjoy watching her stretching, yawning and slowly working her way across the slope, investigating any scrub and cover for European Hares (which Juan told us now make up 40% of their diet). As we were in a radio blackspot, we weren't able to tell anyone else about our sighting, so we enjoyed the experience with just our own group for around forty-five minutes. We drove back for breakfast, stopping to see three Chilean Flamingos on Laguna de los Cisnes.

After breakfast, we had a break and time to explore the hotel island, and then drove to the national park visitor centre and museum, which housed a small exhibition on the history, natural history and geology of the area. After lunch at a restaurant, we restarted our search for Pumas in the late afternoon. We enjoyed the stunning scenery on our drive, with close views of Andean Condors soaring against the backdrop of the snow-topped Andes. A sudden exclamation came from Orlando when he spotted the same female, Pampa, with her cub, crossing through low vegetation near the road. We had good, if brief, views of them walking away and over a slope.

New birds for the day: Chilean Flamingo, Thorn-tailed Rayadito, Chilean Flicker, Magellanic Snipe, Correndera Pipit, Short-eared Owl.

Day 6

Saturday 6th December

Torres del Paine

We had an even earlier start today, but there was no sign of any Pumas in the morning. We enjoyed a walk at Laguna los Juncos, adding some new birds to the list, including Least Seedsnipe in bubbling display flight. We returned for breakfast, before setting out again mid-morning to the far side of the National Park, around Grey Lake.

Our main target here was Magellanic Woodpecker, which did not disappoint! A male and female were busy feeding on the trees right next to the path. We ate lunch in a buffet cafeteria before our group split up, with some choosing to walk through grasslands to look for orchids and other wildlife. The remainder stayed with the minibus to watch the Guanaco herd, but a call soon came through from our tracker that a Puma was close by. We drove over and were lucky to watch a two-year old male named Raya, lazing and rolling on his back by the roadside, before stretching and slowly walking towards and then past us. We drove back to the hotel for some celebratory pisco sours on our last day at Torres del Paine.

New birds for the day: Least Seedsnipe, Spectacled Tyrant, Mourning Sierra Finch, Ringed Kingfisher, Neotropic Cormorant, Ashy-headed Goose, Magellanic Woodpecker.

Day 7

Sunday 7th December

Journey to Porvenir, Tierra del Fuego

We checked out of the hotel after breakfast to start our journey to the end of the world! A diversion along a side road with beautiful scenery found flocks of Lesser Rheas and our mammal target: a Large Hairy Armadillo. We stopped in at a souvenir shop and café for a break (the free penguin bags with every purchase proved popular!) before continuing our journey through the pampas towards the ferry. We birded along the way, with a superb sighting of displaying White-bridled Finches.



Large Hairy Armadillo



Guanaco

We crossed on the ferry at 5.30pm and then started our drive on Tierra del Fuego to Porvenir, where we stayed at Hotel Pulegan. After checking in, we walked over to the local restaurant, where we were warmly welcomed by the owner for a delicious dinner.

New birds for the day: Tawny-throated Dotterel, Common Miner, Chocolate-vented Tyrant, White-bridled Finch.

Day 8

Monday 8th December

King Penguin colony

After breakfast, we started our drive to the King Penguin colony in Useless Bay, with a brief stop to watch a feeding frenzy offshore with lots of gulls, skuas and Black-browed Albatrosses. The park had agreed to open just for our group, as it was a national holiday! We had an introduction on the history of the park and penguin ecology from the warden, before walking the short trail to the colony. None of the group had seen King Penguin before, so it was a real highlight of the trip to see them, and so close.

We returned for a late lunch, and then started again late afternoon, driving along the coast to look for coastal birds. Unexpectedly, we saw another Large Hairy Armadillo, and had long and very close views of it feeding amongst short grassland.

New birds for the day: Black-browed Albatross, Sooty Shearwater, Baird's Sandpiper, King Penguin, Short-billed Miner, Ruddy-headed Goose, Patagonian Yellow Finch.

Day 9

Tuesday 9th December

Journey to Punta Arenas, via Magdalena Island

As bad weather had scuppered the scheduled trip to Magdalena Island at the start of the trip, Juan had rearranged it for today. We drove to the ferry, crossed back to the mainland, and took a scenic route for birding, where we saw an Elegant Crested Tinamou; it has a very limited range in Chile so we were fortunate to see one.

We boarded the ferry to Magdalena Island; some of the group stayed out on deck to watch the seabirds and were rewarded with Magellanic Diving Petrel, Wilson's Storm Petrel (of the Fuegian subspecies) and brief views of Humpback Whales. We were soon landing on the island, to be greeted by the sight and sound of hundreds of Magellanic Penguins.



Magellanic Woodpeckers



Magellanic Penguin

We checked back into the Hotel Diego de Almagro for our final night of the main trip, with a celebratory meal with Juan and Orlando.

New birds for the day: Silver Teal, White-winged Coot, Elegant Crested Tinamou, Magellanic Penguin, Wilson's Storm Petrel, Magellanic Diving Petrel, Kelp Goose.

Day 10

Wednesday 10th December

Journey to Santiago de Chile / return home for group

The group divided on the last day, with two staying in Punta Arenas, two heading home, and the two of us travelling back to Santiago for a three-day birding extension. We were met at the airport by Gonzalo Gonzales (author of the Helm field guide to The Birds of Chile) and checked into our hotel for another four nights.

Days 11 – 14**Thursday 11th – Sunday 14th December**

Day trips from Santiago

We had three full day trips from Santiago with Gonzalo, visiting the high Andes (Yeso River valley), the Maipo river wetlands system, and La Campana National Park and Humboldt Penguin colony.

These were three excellent days of birding in diverse habitats, adding 62 bird species, including Crag Chilia, Chilean Mockingbird, Diademed Sandpiper-plover, Magellanic Tapaculo, Many-coloured Rush Tyrant, Black Skimmer, Giant Hummingbird, Humboldt Penguin, Chilean Seaside Cinclodes and Inca Tern.



Lesser Rhea

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name
Large Hairy Armadillo	<i>Chaetophractus villosus</i>
European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Magellanic Tuco-tuco	<i>Ctenomys magellanicus</i>
South American Sea Lion	<i>Otaria flavescens</i>
Culpeo (Andean Fox)	<i>Lycalopex culpaeus</i>
South American Gray Fox	<i>Lycalopex grisea</i>
Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>
Commerson's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>
Peale's Dolphin	<i>Sagmatias australis</i>
Guanaco	<i>Lama guanicoe</i>

Birds

Common name	Scientific name
Lesser Rhea	<i>Rhea pennata</i>
Elegant Crested Tinamou	<i>Eudromia elegans</i>
Coscoroba Swan	<i>Coscoroba coscoroba</i>
Black-necked Swan	<i>Cygnus melancoryphus</i>
Flying Steamer Duck	<i>Tachyeres patachonicus</i>
Fuegian Steamer Duck	<i>Tachyeres pteneres</i>
Torrent Duck	<i>Merganetta armata</i>
Andean Goose	<i>Chloephaga melanoptera</i>
Upland Goose	<i>Chloephaga picta</i>
Kelp Goose	<i>Chloephaga hybrida</i>
Ashy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga poliocephala</i>
Ruddy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>
Crested Duck	<i>Lophonetta specularioides</i>
Bronze-winged Duck	<i>Speculanas specularis</i>
Silver Teal	<i>Spatula versicolor</i>
Red Shoveler	<i>Spatula platalea</i>
Chiloe Wigeon	<i>Mareca sibilatrix</i>
Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>
Yellow-billed Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>
Lake Duck	<i>Oxyura vittata</i>
California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>
White-sided Hillstar	<i>Oreotrochilus leucopleurus</i>
Giant Hummingbird	<i>Patagona gigas</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Chilean Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas araucana</i>
Picui Ground Dove	<i>Columbina picui</i>
Black-winged Ground Dove	<i>Metriopelia melanoptera</i>
Eared Dove	<i>Zenaida auriculata</i>
Spot-flanked Gallinule	<i>Porphyriops melanops</i>
Red-fronted Coot	<i>Fulica rufifrons</i>
Red-gartered Coot	<i>Fulica armillata</i>
White-winged Coot	<i>Fulica leucoptera</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>
Great Grebe	<i>Podiceps major</i>
Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Chilean Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus chilensis</i>
Magellanic Plover	<i>Pluvianellus socialis</i>
Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>
Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Tawny-throated Dotterel	<i>Oreopholus ruficollis</i>
Diademed Sandpiper-Plover	<i>Phegornis mitchellii</i>
Southern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus chilensis</i>
Two-banded Plover	<i>Anarhynchus falklandicus</i>
Grey-breasted Seedsnipe	<i>Thinocorus orbignyianus</i>
Least Seedsnipe	<i>Thinocorus rumicivorus</i>
Hudsonian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>
Hudsonian Godwit	<i>Limosa haemastica</i>
Magellanic Snipe	<i>Gallinago magellanica</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Baird's Sandpiper	<i>Calidris bairdii</i>
White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>
Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Inca Tern	<i>Larosterna inca</i>
South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>
Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>
Andean Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus serranus</i>
Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus maculipennis</i>
Dolphin Gull	<i>Leucophaeus scoresbii</i>
Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>
Chilean Skua	<i>Stercorarius chilensis</i>
King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>
Humboldt Penguin	<i>Spheniscus humboldti</i>
Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>
Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>
Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>
Magellanic Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides magellani</i>
Peruvian Booby	<i>Sula variegata</i>
Red-legged Cormorant	<i>Poikilocarbo gaimardi</i>
Neotropic Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum brasiliianum</i>
Rock Shag	<i>Leucocarbo magellanicus</i>
Imperial Shag	<i>Leucocarbo atriceps</i>
Black-faced Ibis	<i>Theristicus melanopis</i>
White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Peruvian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus thagus</i>
Andean Condor	<i>Vultur gryphus</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>
Cinereous Harrier	<i>Circus cinereus</i>
Harris's Hawk	<i>Parabuteo unicinctus</i>
Variable Hawk	<i>Geranoaetus polyosoma</i>
Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle	<i>Geranoaetus melanoleucus</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Ringed Kingfisher	<i>Megacyrle torquata</i>
Striped Woodpecker	<i>Veniliornis lignarius</i>
Chilean Flicker	<i>Colaptes pitius</i>
Magellanic Woodpecker	<i>Campephilus magellanicus</i>
Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>
Chimango Caracara	<i>Milvago chimango</i>
White-throated Caracara	<i>Phalcoboenus albogularis</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>
Austral Parakeet	<i>Enicognathus ferrugineus</i>
Common Miner	<i>Geositta cunicularia</i>
Rufous-banded Miner	<i>Geositta rufipennis</i>
Short-billed Miner	<i>Geositta antarctica</i>
Creamy-rumped Miner	<i>Geositta isabellina</i>
Crag Chilia	<i>Ochetorhynchus melanurus</i>
Wren-like Rushbird	<i>Phleocryptes melanops</i>
Scale-throated Earthcreeper	<i>Upucerthia dumetaria</i>
Buff-winged Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes fuscus</i>
Grey-flanked Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes oustaleti</i>
Dark-bellied Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes patagonicus</i>
Chilean Seaside Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes nigrofumosus</i>
Thorn-tailed Rayadito	<i>Aphrastura spinicauda</i>
Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail	<i>Leptasthenura aegithaloides</i>
Dusky-tailed Canastero	<i>Pseudasthenes humicola</i>
Moustached Turca	<i>Pteroptochos megapodus</i>
White-throated Tapaculo	<i>Scelorchilus albicollis</i>
Magellanic Tapaculo	<i>Scytalopus magellanicus</i>
White-crested Elaenia	<i>Elaenia albiceps</i>
Tufted Tit-Tyrant	<i>Anairetes parulus</i>
Many-colored Rush Tyrant	<i>Tachuris rubrigastra</i>
Spot-billed Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola maculirostris</i>
Ochre-naped Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola flavinucha</i>
White-browed Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola albilonra</i>
Black-fronted Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola frontalis</i>
Austral Negrito	<i>Lessonia rufa</i>
Spectacled Tyrant	<i>Hymenops perspicillatus</i>
Fire-eyed Diucon	<i>Pyrope pyrope</i>
Chocolate-vented Tyrant	<i>Neoxolmis rufiventris</i>
Rufous-tailed Plantcutter	<i>Phytotoma rara</i>
Chilean Swallow	<i>Tachycineta leucopyga</i>
Blue-and-white Swallow	<i>Pygochelidon cyanoleuca</i>
Southern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes musculus</i>
Chilean Mockingbird	<i>Mimus thenca</i>
Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falcklandii</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>
Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Spinus barbatus</i>
Yellow-rumped Siskin	<i>Spinus uropygialis</i>
Thick-billed Siskin	<i>Spinus crassirostris</i>
Rufous-collared Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>
Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Leistes loyca</i>
Shiny Cowbird	<i>Molothrus bonariensis</i>
Austral Blackbird	<i>Curaeus curaeus</i>
Yellow-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelasticus thilius</i>
Mourning Sierra Finch	<i>Rhopospina fruticeti</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Grassland Yellow Finch	<i>Sicalis luteola</i>
Patagonian Yellow Finch	<i>Sicalis lebruni</i>
Greater Yellow Finch	<i>Sicalis auriventris</i>
Grey-hooded Sierra Finch	<i>Phrygilus gayi</i>
Patagonian Sierra Finch	<i>Phrygilus patagonicus</i>
White-bridled Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>
Diuca Finch	<i>Diuca diuca</i>