

Part One. Central Chile.

Contributed by Jos
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Starting and finishing in Santiago, this superb circuit encompassed various sites in the high Andes, the woodlands of Altos de Lircay and the nearby Lake Colban, as well as the coastal strip, including the endemic-rich La Campana National Park and quite a number of sites along the Pacific coast. In this part of the trip, I also ventured out into the rich waters of the Humboldt Current on an excellent pelagic trip.

DAILY LOG

10 December. Eastern Europe to Chile, long haul! Two-and-a-half hour flight to London, then all aboard for another two hours to Madrid and onto a connector for a twelve-hour hop direct to Santiago, Chile.

11 December. Farellones. Convenient arrival time of 9.30 a.m. local time, so straight into a rental car and in no time at all skirting the edges of Santiago on route the south-capped Andes looming to the east and to Farellones in particular. Did my best to ignore Eared Doves flitting up from sun-baked roadsides, but as the city's traffic quickly gave way to roads zigzagging up the foothills, then I had truly arrived – my first birding experience in South America was about to begin. Stop one, gauchos and vast herds of cattle utilizing the road, proper sombrero moment. Stop two, a random meander in the now narrow road winding steeply upwards, Chimango Caracara, Band-tailed Sierra-Finches, Common Diuca-Finch, Black-winged Ground-Dove, my field guide was getting its first use! Chilean Mockingbird also pretty common, my first of the country's endemic birds. Some kilometres further up, with a deep valley falling away abruptly to the side of the road, I almost swerved off the road uttering, as described my seven-year old travelling companion, a loud 'Waaaahh', followed by an expletive! Soaring not very many metres below us, the Holy Grail of the Andes, a superb adult Andean Condor! This was the stuff of my childhood dreams, not a dot high over the peaks, but eyeball to eyeball stuff! Just a little bit further along, at a ridge with impressive vistas stretching in all directions, there were Andean Condors everywhere. Close to 40 birds, adults and immatures, many hugging the ridge. I was already getting to like Chile! Higher again, now approaching the high altitude ski resort of Farrelones, the land flattened out a little and expanses of Andean steppe began to dominate. All birds typical of the high puna, here I encountered my first Rufous-banded Miners and Mourning Sierra-Finches of the trip, along with commonplace White-browed Ground-Tyrants, less common Rufous-naped Ground-Tyrants, a couple of Black-billed Shrike-Tyrants and single individuals of Scaly-breasted Earthcreeper and Sharp-billed Canastero. More dramatic, no less than six Mountain Caracaras seemed to be populating a single area of slope. At Farellones itself, a fairly ugly collection of blocks built without great regard to the settings, I had plans to hike to higher slopes in search of Creamy-rumped Miner. However, with snow melt, the approaches to these were sloshy quagmires of wet semi-liquid gravel! Soon gave up on that idea. Still Farellones did have its attractions – Greater Yellow-Finches and Grey-hooded Sierra-Finches were common around the buildings and one rooftop was adorned by an Andean Condor! With plans to explore a mountain area a little to the south the next day, we then began to descend, several more birding stops en route, plus an impromptu stop for a large Rose Tarantula waddling across the road as we reached lower altitudes. Massive fangs on display as it sprang up in attack mode, its front legs rearing up as I moved in close for a photograph ...that made me jump! Passing through Santiago suburbia again, a quick stop in McDonald's added a pair of Southern Lapwings on the grass of a busy roundabout, plus a couple of fly-over Monk Parakeets, then it was on to San Jose de Maipo to find my accommodation for the night – what a nice place it was, a well-equipped canabana, three swimming pools, a bunch of California Quails strutting through adjacent scrub and no shortage of Chilean Mockingbirds. And so ended day one in Chile, a good start I was thinking.

12 December. El Yeso & Altos de Lircay. If there was one bird that I wanted to see in Chile it was Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, a rare bird of remote high altitude cushion bogs (bofedales) that for all practical purposes is limited in Chile to just a couple of accessible localities. Of these, El Yeso is the easiest – just a couple of hours from San Jose de Maipo, it usually holds a pair or two most years. Stop one however was not the bofedales, but rocky crags 20 kilometres short of El Yeso reservoir. Here, as dawn broke, I began my search for two more of Chile's endemic birds, namely Crag Chilia and Moustached Turca. Scrambling around the slopes, I almost immediately bumped into my first Moustached Turca, a weird bird that is vaguely between a pitta and a dipper in appearance. Saw three in all, each strolling around, never flying. Also added three Chilean Flickers, but no Crag Chilia as yet. Returning to my car for coffee, I soon found the correct strategy for the Crag Chilia was to just spot them from the car! Though basically a terrestrial bird, my first was a single bouncing around in the top of a bush, plucking off small berries! Thinking that was unusual, I then found another three doing exactly the same at another bush a couple of kilometres further on. Once found, they proved most approachable, the three together most engaging as they ran around the rocks to and fro from the berry bush. Also had a look at the river in this region – Chilean Mockingbirds and Austral Blackbird in scrub, but better on the river itself: not only Crested Duck (which would later prove common at many highland and coastal sites), but a sleeping blob on a rock which on closer inspection turned out to be a female Torrent Duck! A kilometre upstream, I completed the pair with a stunning male. A nice start to the day. The sun was now rising nicely over the valley, time to head to El Yeso. A small rocky track around the reservoir was productive, full of Grey-hooded Sierra-Finches, Rufous-collared Sparrows and assorted extras, including Rufous-banded Miner, Plumbeous Sierra-Finch and five of the very localised Thick-billed Siskins. My eyes however were keenly scanning the far side of the reservoir – either side of a glacial river, the small pockets of the rich green carpet that are the bofedales were already apparent. Somewhere down there should be the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover! I parked and walked down the rock-strewn slope, Scale-throated Earthcreeper and several White-browed Ground-Tyrants en route.

At the river, I gazed across at the bofedales, far more extensive on the opposite side than this ...and where a Danish birder had found a pair of Diademed Sandpiper-Plovers with chicks the month earlier. 'Just wade across the river' he

had suggested. Jeepers, flowing straight off the snowfields, that water was numbingly cold!!! I also assume the river was now considerably deeper than earlier in the spring – several times I tried to wade across, but the current and depth were rather more than I had expected! My feet were also crying out in pain as they chilled to the bone. A pair of Andean Gulls apparently breeding on the other side, plus several Crested Ducks waddling about, but not fancying a icy dip, I gave up on attempts to cross and began to walk upchannel instead to a smaller set of bofedales. Flushed several Grey-breasted Seedsnipe, found both Austral Negrito and Grey-breasted Cinclodes, but initially not a sign of my main target. Followed a few small streams meandering through the bofedales, then found a little group of waders – five Baird's Sandpipers. Promising I thought, and sat down to watch them. On pebbles just adjacent, a small movement ...and then a bird strutting towards me. Stone me, one stunning Diademed Sandpiper-Plover! And keenly eyeing me, it then proceeded to walk directly towards me, waded a while in the little stream and then trotted even closer and promptly sat down on a nest! Inadvertently I had stumbled across a nesting bird – it didn't actually seem very concerned, but all the same I backed off a little and watched as it just sat there, eye twinkling in the morning sunshine. So there we had it, one of the main bird targets of the trip. Quite content, I then wandered to the stone plains just above, several more Grey-breasted Seedsnipe present, plus more ground-tyrants – amongst the more common White-browed Ground-Tyrants, found single pairs of each Cinereous Ground-Tyrant, Rufous-naped Ground-Tyrant and Black-fronted Ground-Tyrant. I then began my journey back down the mountain, making a spur-of-the-moment decision to quit the region and spend the early afternoon driving the 300 km south to Altos de Lircay National Park. Many Chimango Caracaras en route though the dry arid lowlands, not much else, but as I arrived the landscape quickly changed – rolling hills cloaked in mature beeeegh woodland. As I got a Lircay itself, roadside squawking brought me to a stop ...eight Austral Parakeets in a tree! Target one down. Found a bit of a dump of a cabin for accommodation, then walked up to the gates of the national park. Lots of bird activity, mixed flocks of Thorn-tailed Rayadito and White-crested Elaenia especially prominent, accompanied by quite a few other species, the best being White-throated Treerunners, Tufted Tit-Tyrant and Plain-mantled Tit-Spintail. Now early evening, the gates were actually locked, but a side gate allowed pedestrian access and I wandered a little further – good job too, for one of the first bird I encountered was a superb male Magellanic Woodpecker busying itself on a tree trunk, its vivid red head a treat. Complementing nicely, also found a Chilean Flicker and Striped Woodpecker in this general area. To round the day off, just as it was beginning to get dark, I was in for a final treat - alerted by the loud haunting calls, I squinted down to peer into the depths of a bush and there, rooting about on the ground, was a Chestnut-throated Huet-huet, a classic bird indeed and one of specialities of Lircay. All in all, a very good day. Returned to my accommodation, one more male Magellanic Woodpecker above the cabin. Did have plans to go out looking for owls, but as the chills of the night airs descended, it somehow didn't happen! 13 December. Altos de Lircay, Lake Colban & La Campana National Park. In the depths of thick tangles at Lircay lurk not only the exotic Chestnut-throated Huet-huets, but also all sorts of hard-to-see tapaculos. Fancied a few of these on this morning, but bar a calling Chucao Tapaculo in the depths of some bamboo, my dawn walk drew a blank ...probably didn't go far enough into the reserve. I did however get some excellent views of a pair of Chestnut-throated Huet-huet near the first stream as you enter the reserve and, as the day before, bumped into no end of Thorn-tailed Rayaditos, White-crested Eleanias and several White-throated Treerunners and Tufted Tit-Tyrants. Also one female Magellanic Woodpecker. With other potential sites for tapaculos later on in the trip, I didn't stay that long as I wanted to get round to the nearby Lake Colban before the worst of the day's heat hit. Small flocks of Austral Parakeets as I departed, so too Fire-eyed Diucon and common birds such as Chilean Mockingbird and Austral Thrush. A little over 30 minutes later, I arrived at the large Lake Colban – a little disappointing in that most of the shores seemed inaccessible, rafts of distant dots undoubtedly hid a few special birds, but amongst those a little closer, I picked out plenty of Chiloe Wigeon and Yellow-billed Pintail, a couple of Spectacled Teal, several dozen Neotropic Cormorants, a whole bunch of Red-gartered Coots, my first White-tufted Grebes and Great Grebes of the trip and assorted herons and egrets. My main target here was not a waterbird, but Burrowing Parrot, colonies of which were supposed to occur at the margins of the lake. Failed to find any at any of the limited access points to the lake, so tried a new strategy of slowly driving with the windows open hoping to hear a squawk or two. Ultimately this resulted in success – not at the lake itself, but a couple of kilometres beyond it where the feeder river has cut enormous cliffs into the sandy soil. Here, beside a small church at the edge of a village, two raucous birds sat in the branches of a tree hanging over the edge of the cliff. I suspect they were breeding in the cliff, but either way they were most impressive, occasionally flying down to a shingle island mid-river, then rising back to this same overhang in a riot of colour and noise. Main target down, I then had a quick look round other parts of the lake, then stopped at a small place selling empanadas -fried cheese-stuffed things scoffed on a veranda with Grassland Yellow-Finches and Long-tailed Meadowlarks in a weedy field adjacent, two Chilean Pigeons flying over and a whole bunch of Black Vultures circling overhead. Also Shiny Cowbirds, Fire-eyed Diucons and Austral Blackbirds. Then back on the road, heading north again for 350 km to La Campana National Park near Valparaiso. Big flock of Chimango Caracaras en route, probably about 130 in all, then finally got to La Campana an hour or so before dark. Had ideas to camp in the reserve, but the gates were already closed, so had a quick look round – highlights being a Giant Hummingbird and a flock of about 150 California Quails – then went down to the nearby village to find accommodation. Settled into a nice place with fairly luxurious cabins, lawns with Southern Lapwings and a swimming pool, then awaited dark. Night time owling session was pretty good – one distant calling Rufous-legged Owl and, even better, several calling Austral Pygmy Owls, one of which had the good grace to sit in a roadside garden hooting away. Found this bird with out too much effort, then retired back to the cabin. 14 December. La Campana, Cachagua, Quintero & Concon. Steep slopes of La Campana from dawn, remote chances of Chilean Tinamou in the dry woodland here, plus several other Chilean endemics, most importantly Dusky-tailed Canastero, White-throated Tapaculo and Dusky Tapaculo. Quite hard going in the thick vegetation, quite dark too with the hills shading these valley slopes. In the valley bottom, following a path near a stream (mostly dry), bird density was

pretty high – a couple of Giant Hummingbirds, plus Austral Thrushes and White-crested Eleania especially common, with occasional mixed flocks also containing Tufted Tit-Tyrants and Plain-backed Tit-Spinetails. Green-backed Firecrown zipped past, also bumped into a couple of Striped Woodpeckers. These valley bottoms are also supposed to be the main localities for Dusky Tapaculo, a diminutive skulker that has a preponderance for thick bamboo and similar. Chance encountering is also going to be fairly unlikely, but fortunately they also quite loud when they chose to be. And this is how I finally found one, the distinctive call echoing out from tangles near a picnic site. Sat myself in the middle and eventually this little mite of a bird popped out to investigate – dumpy little slate-grey thing barely the size of a wren, very nice it was. Actually appeared right over my head at one stage, but in the gloom of the undergrowth, photographs were always going to be a fantasy. With this difficult bird well and truly seen, I then headed up to the scrubby hillsides to try for the next birds on my hit list – Dusky-tailed Canastero proved easy enough, a total of four seen in quite a short while, but White-throated Tapaculo proved a little harder. On an open trail towards an old mine, several were singing against each other just as the sun began to hit the slope. Sat here quite a while, Moustached Turca also singing and scrambling around on the rocks. The White-throated Tapaculos refused to rise from the bottoms of the bushes. I relocated a little and sat on the track below two rival singing birds. Was doubting I would see these birds, but after various views of tails and shapes scrambling around in one bush, gradually one of the pairs edged up a scrawny shrub and eventually popped up on top ...White-throated Tapaculo, not the easiest of Chilean endemics. Very soon, the sun was high and the heat began to build, thoughts of a Chilean Tinamou began to fade. Still had one slightly weird sight however – as I passed through the neighbouring village, a little blob on a power line caught my attention. Stopping to investigate, it turned out to be a diminutive nest delicately stuck upon the line, one Giant Hummingbird adorning the top! Quite fascinating. With that, we departed the area and headed for the coast, thoughts of the Humboldt Current whetting my lips. Stopped briefly at a landfill chock-a-block with Black Vultures and Chimango Caracaras, then a second pause at a small rivermouth at La Laguna. This latter site was pleasant, a mix of waders dominated by White-backed Stilts and Hudsonian Whimbrels, plus my first Peruvian Pelicans of the trip, a bunch of Red-gartered Coots and assorted other waterbirds. Only a short stop however for I had plans on a beach some kilometres further. So there we were, mid-afternoon on the white sands of Cachagua, a couple of Peruvian Boobies flying offshore, Peruvian Pelicans lumbering by. Setting up my telescope, I trained it on the rocky island just offshore and invited my younger travelling companion to peer through. A sharp intake of breathe, then an exclamation 'PENGUINS!' And indeed there were, we were looking at Isla Cachagua, an island of birds. Waddling around and in clusters here and there, a few hundred Humboldt Penguins occupying mostly lower areas of the island, Kelp Gulls and Peruvian Pelicans lining the top. From my perspective, equally good were the birds feeding on the rocks just to edge of the beach – not only both American and Blackish Oystercatchers, but a pair of Chilean Seaside Cinclodes. This, another of Chile's endemics, occurs exclusively on these rocky coast of central Chile, almost always feeding amongst areas of seaweed and around inter-tidal pools. This pair clearly had chicks in a nest in the adjacent seawall, flying down to forage on rocks exposed by the sea, then back up to the seawall with great mouthfuls of food. Nice birds. It was then time to head a little further south to Quintero for a short seawatch – not the best time of day in terms of the sun, but not bad regardless. Red-legged, Guanay and Neotropic Cormorants to a backdrop of Peruvian Boobies and Peruvian Pelicans trickling by, along with a Southern Giant Petrel and assorted gulls. Blackish Oystercatchers and Chilean Seaside Cinclodes here too, plus West Peruvian Dove in the nearby town, a recent colonist from further north. To end the day, we journeyed to the resort city of Concon and checked into a hotel with a massive balcony overlooking the sea ...and I have to say it was probably the birdiest balcony I have ever experienced! To a setting sun, beyond the folk on the beach, the sea was heaving with birds, literally thousands of Peruvian Boobies plunge-diving in great flocks and many hundreds of Peruvian Pelicans joining in the action. Far offshore, Sooty Shearwaters were massing, closer to the beach a mix of Kelp and Franklin's Gulls, one Grey Gull too. As dusk approached, at least 80 Black Skimmers appeared, perhaps on their way to roost somewhere, four Black-crowned Night Heron too. All from the comfort of an armchair, coffee and nibbles to the side ...not a bad way to conclude the evening. 15 December. El Peral, Carthagen & Concon Sea cloud at dawn, distinctively damp. Plan for this day was the twin wetlands of El Peral and Carthagen some 50 km further north. El Peral is a moderate-sized pool sandwiched between roads and a bit of semi-urban sprawl. Despite an Austral Pygmy-Owl on roadside wires on arrival, it didn't really look especially inspiring in the dull conditions of the morning! Not bad for birds though, a quick scan quickly notching up 40 Coscoroba Swans, 14 Black-necked Swans, several hundred Yellow-billed Pintail, a few dozen Red Shovelers and about 30 Chiloe Wigeon and Lake Duck. Also at least 30 White-tufted Grebes and 20 Silvery Grebes, along with 150 Red-gartered Coots, 40 or so White-winged Coots and 20 Red-fronted Coots. As the sun climbed and the cloud thinned, I wandered round the small trail on the western side of the pool and added a few more birds, including my only Cocoa Heron of the trip, a Plumbeous Rail and a typical assortment of dry country birds such as Picui Ground-Dove and Austral Negrito. Mid-morning I shifted across to Carthagen. A small pool up against the beach, this was nevertheless productive – a similar selection to El Peral, but with the added attraction of a bustling Brown-hooded Gull colony on an island and several Coypu. Walked round this pool for an hour, the highlights being Spot-flanked Gallinule, Harris Hawk and assorted waders, including photogenic American Oystercatchers, then departed to return to Concon.

The coast between Vina de Mar and Concon is simply fantastic – a series of rocky peninsulas, all loaded with excellent birds. Peruvian Pelicans everywhere, Peruvian Boobies common, all three of the central Chilean cormorants widespread and, star of the coast, Inca Tern fortunately also very common. Stopped at one particular point, a small island a few metres offshore adjacent to the Marine Institute, which was very nice indeed – a bunch of South American Fur Seals hauled out on the one side, 80 or so Inca Terns breeding in the middle and Red-legged Cormorants lining rocky outcrops. Not a good day for one Inca Tern however – a Kelp Gull managed to catch one and then set about plucking and devouring it in the centre of the colony much to distress of the other terns! Also Blackish

Oystercatchers with chicks, plus a mixed bunch of Ruddy Turnstones and Surfbirds dabbling around at the water's edge and a pair of Chilean Seaside Cinclodes present too. A couple of hundred metres further along, yet more Inca Terns were breeding in holes in the wall that supported the road. Ended the day back on my balcony, perhaps slightly fewer birds offshore this evening. 16 December. Quintero, Concon & the Rio Maipo. Seawatch from dawn at Quintero – ideal lighting conditions now, but not a scrap of wind to push any of the deep water pelagic species onshore. Overall I would describe it as moderately quiet, but still, I was in for a treat! As expected, a steady stream of Peruvian Boobies and Peruvian Pelicans passing, but totally not as expected, rather large numbers of Peruvian Diving-Petrels. These are superb little things, little doodle-bugs with whirling wings, very reminiscent of Little Auks as they wizzed by. Had hoped for one or two, but in a space of three hours, I recorded a grand total of at least 180, all southbound, some settling on the water for short spells. Also about 30 Sooty Shearwaters, one close-range Southern Giant Petrel and, major surprise, a Blue-footed Booby! A vagrant to Chile, the few records of Blue-footed Booby in Chile are usually associated with El Nino years, when warmer waters push the species further south than usual. This particular individual, an adult, tried to sneak by with Peruvian Boobies - tagging on the rear of a small group, they had almost passed by before I gave them a glance, the pale rump patch and streaky head then immediately standing out. So no albatrosses or small petrels, but a pretty good seawatch regardless. On route back, stopped at the mouth of the Concon River, adding a flock of about 200 Black Skimmers, an assortment of Nearctic waders and, the highlight, a family of five Burrowing Owls on the sandy ground just adjacent. To be honest however, I had messed up my plans here – I was actually expecting the far better Rio Maipo to be at this spot! Checking my maps, I then realised it was actually 70 km further south and actually quite close to where I had been the day before. Hmmp! Got in the car, retraced my steps and as mid-afternoon approached arrived at Lilloe. I aimed for two big pools that were on my map, but I was a little surprised to find myself right in the middle of a huge container port, trucks rumbling in all directions, containers stacked piled high. Not a very attractive destination it had to be said, but the pools were indeed there ...and crammed full of birds! So, sitting on the grass with trucks to our rear, there we enjoyed the spectacle! Many hundreds of ducks, coots and cormorants present, so too 44 Black-necked Swans and eight Coscoroba Swans. Additionally, many Black-crowned Night Herons, a few Snowy Egrets, bunches of White-tufted Grebes and Silvery Grebes and three Spot-flanked Gallinules. A small reedy patch at one end added more new birds, most notably several Wrenlike Rushbirds and, the males a dazzle of colour, a few Many-coloured Rush-Tyrants. Also a few waders present, the best being a Collared Plover on the second of the pools. I realised however that I was still not at the main birding locality, ie the actual mouth of the Rio Maipo. To get here, I had to retrace my way through town, pass over a major bridge and access the river via the beachfront to the south. At this point, there is a reserve headquarters and a trail looping off towards the river. Late afternoon and very hot by now, but off we trudged ...Rufous-tailed Plantcutter in the first area of dune scrub, then a relatively barren area of dune until the rivermouth. Here though vast flocks of gulls and terns in the shimmering heat, Franklin's Gulls in the main it seemed, but a good scattering of Grey Gulls too and many waders too. Heat haze and the decision to leave the scope behind did few favours, but closer waders were Baird's Sandpipers in the main, quite a few Lesser Yellowlegs too. Better stuff though in a patch of marsh – a quick pish prompting both Grass Wren and Many-coloured Rush-Tyrants to pop out into the open. Not the same for a Warbling Doradito – a quiet tick tick tick revealing its position, but it was quite some time before I finally got to see it as it crept along reed bases. Female Spectacled Tyrant here too, plus Yellow-winged Blackbird and Shiny Cowbird. Ambled along the each for a while, no seabirds offshore, then headed back to Concon, via an extensive area of smouldering hillsides and burnout skeletons of trees ...massive wildfires in central Chile this year. Two White-throated Hawks in this general vicinity. Evening back on the coast near Concon. 17 December. Portillo. With a pelagic trip scheduled for the 18th, today I had a day to kill. Though excellent for birds, the coast was a little bit tame, I really yearned to return to the high snow caps of the Andes. So, having seen all my targets on the coast, I opted for a day trip to Portillo, a high altitude area abutting the Argentine border some 85 km north-east of Santiago. A two-and-a-half hour journey from the coast, I was nevertheless winding up the final approach roads soon after dawn, a roadside Dark-bellied Cinclodes one of the first birds of the day. At 3000 m, a half dozen kilometres from the border, I stopped at a small ski resort and began exploring. And super it was, a good complement to Farellones and El Yeso – as at the previous sites, plenty of White-browed Ground-Tyrants, Cinereous ground-Tyrants and Rufous-banded Miners, plus six Scale-throated Earthcreepers and about 20 Greater Yellow-Finches, but added extras included four White-sided Hillstars and at least 15 Black-fronted Ground-Tyrants. A little later, I zigzagged up to the border post and walked a track leading to the right. Several Brown Hares here, but sparse birdlife overall. Did manage one good bird though – after a couple of Rufous-banded Miners, up flitted a miner with a pale rump ... high altitude specialist Creamy-rumped Miner! The track I was on however was descending towards a military camp ...thinking it was not too good an idea to wander straight into such a camp on an international border, I returned to the car. A few kilometres back down the mountain, the next site was a broad area of flat meadow aside a small stream. This was an excellent spot, both Buff-winged and Grey-flanked Cinclodes along the stream, a male Torrent Duck and in the scrubby stuff a bunch of Black-winged Ground-Doves, two stonking Thick-billed Siskins, a couple of dozen Yellow-rumped Siskins and two Plumbeous Sierra-Finches. Remarkably however, as at El Yeso, I failed to find further Andean Condors ...only raptors this day were two Variable Hawks and one Mountain Caracara. With that, it now middle afternoon, I turned tail and headed back to the coast, a slightly slower journey with traffic. 18 December. Quintero & Estero Lampa. Day of the pelagic. Quintero dock 6.30 a.m., Peruvian Pelicans lounging about, Guanay Cormorants passing over. A Dutch couple, myself and two Chileans board the boat, destination the cold waters of Humboldt Current, one of the world's great seawatching localities. Sun just rising, we chugged out past the Quintero headland that I had sat upon a couple of days earlier, Inca Terns and Peruvian Boobies now flying past the boat, a Northern Giant Petrel sitting on the sea. A small detour as fins appeared a little to our north, a pod of Risso's Dolphins the result, soon after followed by a Fin Whale. Small numbers of Peruvian Diving-Petrels were now zooming by (far less

than I had seen off the headland however), followed by a couple of small flocks of Red Phalaropes rising off the water.

We were now in the 'bird zone', Pink-footed Shearwaters over the place, Sooty Shearwaters plentiful too. A couple of Chilean Skuas passed by, then a shout went up, our first albatross of the day – an adult Salvin's Albatross riding the waves to our stern. Soon there were more, Salvin's Albatrosses by the dozen, Black-browed Albatrosses also appearing in similar numbers. Loads of Pink-footed Shearwaters now, plus the twin pair of White-chinned Petrels and Westland's Petrels. Close in, identification of these two was actually rather easier than I had expected, the dark-tipped bill of the latter easy to pick out in most. At some point around here, it was time to dump the chum. Overboard went a rather fragrant mix of fish oil, offal and chopped fish, in came a marauding pack of albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels! Slowly chugging along tipping out the chum, the next 30 minutes or so were impressive – at a range of as little as a metre or two, huge Salvin's and Black-browed Albatrosses squabbling with all the Pink-footed Shearwaters, Westland's Petrels, etc, to gobble down as much as possible as quickly as possible! Wilson's Storm Petrels danced at the edges of the flocks, the head of a South American Sea Lion popped up in the middle. In the middle of all of this, two notable highlights, both fairly brief unfortunately. First, a Buller's Albatross coming to investigate, flying in from the south, making a single mid-distance pass before evaporating away never to be seen again, then in rather dramatic fashion a pterodroma petrel appearing right above our heads. Two or three circuits of the boat, straight through the chum pack, then it was off ...Juan Fernandez Petrel. Good one. With a moderate amount of swell, the skipper then decided it was time to head back towards the coast – a little disappointing as we were scheduled to stay out an hour or so longer. Still opportunity for more birds however as we headed in. Encountered a few Red Phalaropes again as we neared the inshore, but far less expected was a Great Shearwater milling around with Pink-footed Shearwaters, this being a vagrant to Chile. As we reached the sheltered waters of Quintero Bay, we looped around to look in vain for Humboldt Penguins ...did see all three species of coastal cormorant however, plus South American Sea Lions resting on buoys and my first Sanderlings of the trip, a flock of 60 on a mooring. Back on land by midday, a collection of Kelp Gulls and Peruvian Pelicans sitting around the quayside. Meandered back towards Santiago in the afternoon, attempting to find wetland areas in the Estero area. Not entirely successful with most areas hot and parched, water a notable scarcity. Areas that have held Painted Snipe in the past were basically dust bowls and the best area I found could best be described as slightly damp at its heart rather than wet! Hardly surprisingly, Cattle Egrets were the closest I got to waterbirds in the marsh, while a nearby stream did little better with several Red-fronted Coots being the main attraction. Lots of Chimango Caracaras however, a swirling flock of them containing at least 180, plus two American Kestrels, a mass of Yellow-winged Blackbirds, two male Spectacled Tyrants, a Warbling Doradito and 12 Correndera Pipits. In the sweltering sun, I soon gave up on trying to find a reservoir that seemed to be isolated by fenced off lands, so headed into the nearby Santiago and checked into a hotel near the airport, Monk Parakeets in attendance. And with that so ended the first part of this trip to Chile, next morning would see me on a plane to the wilds of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, something I was truly looking forward to. Part Two, Patagonia & Tierra del Fuego. [CLICK HERE](#)