

Part Two. Patagonia & Tierra del Fuego

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Wednesday, 01 March 2017

Covering the superb Patagonian grasslands and Torres del Paine National Park, along with sites on Tierra del Fuego, this was very much the highlight of the trip to Chile. Amongst the iconic species seen, a mouthwatering array of birds including King Penguins, Patagonian Mockingbird and Magellanic Plover, while mammals included two fantastic Mountain Lions, a couple of Big Hairy Armadillos and numerous Hog-nosed Skunks.

DAILY LOG 19 December. Punta Arenas to Puerto Natales.

From the air, treeless plains stretching to the horizon, dotted by numerous pools and indented by a rocky coast ...descending to the small airport at Punta Arenas, this was the enchanted land awaiting. Stepped off the plane, brr, a chill wind to remind us that we were now little over a thousand kilometres from the Antarctic Peninsula. Picked up a car and headed off to the north-east, Upland Geese immediately appearing roadside. Stopped for a pause by the coast a few kilometres along - almost lost the car door as it got wrenched by the wind, but that aside it was most excellent. A pair of Flying Steamer-Ducks sitting on boulders, Crested Ducks and Magellanic Oystercatchers either side of them. Austral Negrillos feeding on short turf, bold and chunky Southern Caracaras sitting atop a bank just further along. The plan for this day was to meander 300 kilometres or so northwards via quiet gravel roads and hopefully pick up most of the Patagonian specialities en route. First however, I hoped to find one of the true stars of Patagonia, Magellanic Plover. Rather localised, this bird favours open shores of shallow pools, the best known sites being in the Porvenir area on Tierra del Fuego. On the mainland however, there is also a lake some 30 km north of the airport that sometimes reportedly holds the birds. Sunshine and 13 C as I arrived, but with brisk winds whipping up waves across the extensive lake. Hundreds of Upland Geese present, many trailing broods of young goslings, more Southern Caracaras, a pair of Flying Steamer-Ducks. Hopped over a roadside fence and began to walk the southern shoreline, eyes watering a little in wind. Chiloe Wigeon skittled out onto the lake, small rafts of Yellow-billed Pintail too, plus a pair of Silver Teal. A kilometre along, short-cropped grass grazed by geese, a couple of Baird's Sandpipers busied themselves along the water's edge ...and here, plump and splendid in ashy-grey, one Magellanic Plover. Truly a very nice bird, I watched this individual for quite a while as it actively fed in the shallows, barely ever stopping to pause. Then, suddenly up it flushed and zigzagged across the lake, disappearing as a dot towards the far shore. A hundred metres along I found another, feeding in company with a young Two-banded Plover. Excellent thought I, then I discovered there was yet another pair feeding quietly on the short turf about 50 metres from the lake's edge. One of my main targets for Patagonia was well and truly in the bag! With this, I returned south and then looped east to access the northbound Road 455, a lonely gravel track that would wind through pampass grassland for over 120 km. And super it was, from the very outset, a landscape dotted by massive great featherballs (aka Lesser Rheas) strutting their stuff, an impressive 250 or so seen along this route. Also many dozens of Guanicos and a splendid range of birds, including a minimum of 25 Least Seedsnipes, a couple of small flocks of Ashy-headed Geese, frequent Southern Caracaras, numerous Austral Negrillos and more localised species such as Common Miner, Cordilleran Canastero, Black-throated Finch and Patagonian Sierra-Finch.

One of the biggest surprises however was at a small stream crossing – I was standing next to the car watching a Grey-flanked Cinclodes when my younger companion suddenly shouted 'Behind you! What's that?' Swinging round, I was astonished to see a Big Hairy Armadillo darting across the track a mere two or three metres away!!! Rattled off a couple of photographs, but this thing was in quite some hurry ...up the back it went and down along the stream, gone! A bonus indeed, I had hoped to see this species in Patagonia, but had fully expected I would need to put in extensive hours at night.

Two species I had expected to see along this track however were conspicuous by their absence – despite frequent stops and scans, not a sign of either Tawny-throated Dotterel or Rufous-chested Dotterel. As I neared the end of Road 455, I presumed by chances were edging away. Onto Road 405 I turned, another gravel road cutting through this wilderness. Still heaps of Guanaco and Lesser Rhea, then some birds on the road ...stopped, put the binoculars up, Tawny-throated Dotterel! Then more, I was in the middle of a flock! Scanned the adjacent plain and my dotterel tally soared considerably – not just eight Tawny-throated Dotterels, but three Rufous-chested Dotterel too!

Four or five hours we had been on these gravel roads and not a single other car had we seen, nor a single petrol station since leaving the airport ...and having picked the car up with only half a tank, I was now a little concerned that we might not actually have enough to get to Port Natales, still some 150 km distant. Still on we went, trying to drive a little faster to get to Port Natales before dark. Not too easy however with umpteen stops for assorted birds, two Chocolate-vented Tyrants among the new birds. Then a shout from my passenger, 'Stop, go back'. Reversed a few dozen metres to a most splendid sight – quite how I had missed them I am not sure, but there were two young Hog-nosed Skunks play-fighting at the edge of the road! Thinking they would be timid, I quietly edged round the car to get some shots only to get spotted by the mother who came running over to tackle me! Brave little thing, she repeatedly charged me, tail raised high, stopping only when less than a metre away! As for the youngsters, they couldn't care less, we watched them as close as we liked, they occasionally glancing at us, but otherwise just continuing to play. Eventually we got the main Punta Arenas-Port Natales road, turned north and motored onward to the town. Arrived early evening, two Cinereous Harriers as we approached town, lines of Imperial Cormorants on an old jetty as we got to the centre. For a first day in Patagonia, I was feeling quite content – not only the key Magellanic Plovers and both dotterels, but Big Fat Armadillo and Hog-nosed Skunk too. Found quite a nice hotel just off the waterfront, had a meal in town. Next days

would be roughing it!

20 December. Puerto Natales & Torres de Paine

The waterfront off Puerto Natales is jam-packed with birds, flocks of Black-necked Swans lining the town's promenade (at least 300), South American Terns roaming up and down, Imperial Cormorants on the jetty, stacks more. And all to a backdrop of a distant glacier and mountains. A pleasant couple of early morning hours here notched up quite a good species list, including Magellanic Oystercatchers, a posse of eight Southern Giant Petrels and two Northern Giant Petrels lingering near some fishing boats, a lone Black-browed Albatross sitting on the water and a wonderful Andean Condor flying low over the rocky shores to the north. Also, roosting amongst Kelp Gulls and Brown-hooded Gulls, my first Dolphin Gulls of the trip, eight in all.

The plan for this day was to meander northwards towards Torres de Paine, then find somewhere to camp and await the evening. Numerous stops on route, Austral Parakeets and Thorn-tailed Rayadito at one place, one more Andean Condor at another. Overall however, as we gradually gained altitude and passed endless kilometres of scrubby woodland, birding did not prove particularly productive. Ahead through the dramatic pinnacles of Torres were rising, soon we would be entering the lands of the Mountain Lion!

Casting my eyes over the high slopes, patches of snow in great gullies, this was truly an place that I was dreaming of – reportedly one of the best places in the world for this most elusive of cats, chances of encountering one were still basically remote. It was for Mountain Lion however that I had ventured this far north in Patagonia – my plan was to relax much of the day, then begin my search late evening, seek out likely-looking areas and spend the whole night out there if need be. Plan B was to repeat the same the following evening, etc, etc. For now though, I arrived at open meadowland adjacent to the Rio Serrano, a quaint campsite nestled beneath trees. Perfect for the day with Upland Geese and Black-faced Ibises in the open areas, a mix of passerines in the campsite. Erected the tent, chucked out a few scraps ...Patagonian Sierra-Finches and Rufous-collared Sparrow immediately around our feet taking the hand-outs. So passed the day, enjoying the sun and some rather easy-going birding. By 5.00 p.m., I was getting a little itchy – time to get moving! Traversed the grassland, the Black-faced Ibises in a flock of 40 now, then began my route through Torres. Almost from nowhere, a wicked wind suddenly appeared, roaring through the mountains, an accompanying snowstorm obliterating everything in its path ...all of a sudden, things were beginning to look not too rosy for cat-spotting! White-tufted Grebe and Lake Ducks sheltering in the lea of reeds on a large lake, pods of Chiloe Wigeon and Red Shoveler too. I continued onward and crossed a mountain ridge, bye bye the storm, the weather was quite different on this side – still windy and now quite cold, but a dappled evening sun painting a rather nice picture across a landscape of mountains, hillocks and small lakes. My first Guanicos of the day grazed a hillside, then a few more. As I encountered more, these I would watch for any sign of alert, possible indicators of feline presence. One false alarm as a couple engaged in some territorial dispute, chasing each other across a slope. Venturing further east, four Ashy-headed Geese, increasing numbers of Guanaco, then two Hog-nosed Skunks, a mother and youngster.

Approaching 10 p.m., as the sun began to sink, it began to feel like a make or break moment – surely the most likely time for the Mountain Lions to be stirring, but still with enough light to easily spot one. I reached the Rio Paine, a broad flow of water with wide grassland margins, a scatter of Upland Geese dotted around. Scanned in vain, then prepared for night, setting up my spotlight in readiness for dark, planning my route. Chugged off again, intially following the river. Pulling herself into a sleeping bag in the passenger seat, my younger companion had decided that our chances of seeing Mountain Lion had evaporated and she was going to sleep! Mutiny! I was however instructed to wake her if we should find one, or a fox of any description.

And then it happened ...at 10.20 pm, with the light still good, something caught my attention, I think it was initially Long-tailed Meadowlarks alarming. I glanced down towards the river and stopped almost in disbelief. There, poking up through the long grass, the head of Mountain Lion staring straight at me! And there it sat, a metre or so from the river, just sitting and looking around.

Little one was up and out of the sleeping bag and got a glimpse before it turned and vanished into the grass. Some minutes later, more chacking of birds a little further along and there reappeared the Mountain Lion, walking along the river bank, then sitting in full view on some shingle. Minutes passed, the Mountain Lion continued to sit there. Eventually, as the light began to fade, a night of hunting beckoned the animal, it turned and strolled out of sight.

High fives in our car! Well, no need for any Plan B anymore, nor a long night scouring the hillsides. We opted for a direct return to our campsite, using the spotlight all the way back in the hope of finding perhaps a South American Grey Fox. Was about 40 km back to our tent, soon we spotlit a few Guanaco, then we came across a pair of bright beady eyes on a slope above the road. What is that? Whatever it was, it had long legs and two very bright eyes and was sitting facing us! Fixed the spotlight, then raised the binoculars. Then it got up and began to walk parallel ...stone me, another Mountain Lion! Flanking the slope, it walked right the way past us and up onto another ridge, Guanico below. Over the ridge it went, a creature into the night.

The last hour has been mindblowing, I really had not expected to find Mountain Lion, but here we were, two different individuals now seen! Didn't find any Grey Foxes on route back, the only additional animals being a dozen Brown Hares as we crossed the grasslands. An hour or so after midnight, we arrived back at camp, happy sleeping that night.

21 December. Torres de Paine, Transit Road & Punta Delgada.

Back on the tracks of Torres de Paine at dawn, a quick look round for further signs of Mountain Lion. Only gave it a couple of hours, then quit for breakfast of sorts on the banks of the river near the night before's sighting – Spectacled Ducks on the river, Rufous-tailed Plantcutters in adjacent scrub, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles and Andean Condor overhead. Added a few more birds such as Cordilleran Canastero and Buff-winged Cinclodes, then decided to cut and run, the new plan being to spend the entire day traversing the Patagonian grasslands en route for Punta Delgada far to the east, a drive of 390 km.

Drove fairly quickly to Puerto Natales and onward to the gravel transit road 405. From there on, drove more sedately, frequent stops to scan the grassland. Lesser Rheas again in abundance, so too Southern Caracaras and Least Seedsnipes, the latter including a small chick beside the road. Also six Chocolate-vented Tyrants, a pair of Dark-faced Ground-Tyrants, fifteen Common Miners, at least 18 Black-throated Finches and, highlight, no less than 22 Tawny-throated Dotterels, most in a single flock. Equally impressive though were the mammals – six species recorded on the transit, not just Gunacos (at least 300) and Brown Hares (minimum 40), but also three more Hog-nosed Skunks, one more Big Hairy Armadillo and, another cause for celebration, three South American Grey Foxes (one feeding at a carcass, one sleeping on a bank, one running across the grasslands). Even better, discovered three young Culpeo Foxes living in a culvert beneath the road.

Arrived in Punta Delgada in the early evening, no hotels in the area, so plonked the tent up aside an intertidal mudflat. Ended the day to three Cinereous Harriers, 20 or so Magellanic Oystercatchers, eight Two-banded Plovers and a whole host of other birds, washed down by hot dogs and coffee at a small cafe next to the ferry port for Tierra del Fuego.

22 December. Punta Delgada & Tierra del Fuego.

Rain and heavy skies early morning ...stayed in the tent till 10 am! As the rain eased, we quickly took the tent down and piled it into a soggy mass in the back of the car. Set off to explore to countryside just to the east, quickly finding a Ruddy-headed Goose next to a track a couple of kilometres along. As well as being a good area for this rare goose, this nick of land jutting up along the Argentine border is also the only area in Chile that holds a couple of other restricted species, namely Patagonian Mockingbird and Band-tailed Earthcreeper. Chances of these however in the poor weather were low, so I resolved to return here later in the trip and instead take the ferry across to Tierra del Fuego.

Only a short ferry crossing at this point and not considered anywhere near as good as the longer Punta Arenas-Porvenir crossing, I did however see a few birds, highlights being two Southern Giant Petrels and my first Magellanic Penguins, three sitting on the water. Also three Peale's Dolphins. Over on Tierra del Fuego, order of the day was to drive to Provenir. Sun broke out half way there, roadside stops then adding Short-billed Miner to the trip trip, along with umpteen more Guanaco and a range of common birds. Checked in at Yendegaia House, a small hotel run by a Chilean birder, then spent the remainder of the day seawatching on the coast just north of Porvenir. Splendid stuff, flocks of Dolphin Gulls in the ferry port, Flying Steamer-Ducks on the rocky coast and at least 25 Black-browed Albatrosses, 12 Southern Giant Petrels and 30 Chilean Skuas off the exposed headland beyond.

To a setting sun, flights of Imperial Cormorants began to wing by, 800 or so passing in the final half hour of the day.

23 December. Day of the Penguins! On the southern shores of the wind-swept Bahia Inútil, 120 kilometres down the western flank of Tierra del Fuego, a treat awaits awaiting visiting birders – King Penguins! A species of remote sub-Antarctic islands and the Falklands, these represent just about the the most accessible King Penguins in the world, albeit that being a rather relative term – the colony is in fact at 53° south, just about the same distance to the Antarctic continent as are the Falkland Islands.

Left Porvevir early morning, blue skies to the west. Two to three hours on gravel roads to the locality, but birds galore on route, not least Austral Negritos two-a-penny, a minimum of 20 Short-billed Miners, a single Buff-winged Cinclodes and a Cordilleran Canastero. Hundreds of Upland Geese aside shallow lakes, also four Ashy-headed Geese and, a significant number for this globally-endangered species, no less than nine Ruddy-headed Geese in a flock and a further three pairs trailing goslings. Also added a couple of Grey Foxes, a Least Seedsnipe and, very nice indeed, a flock of nine Rufous-chested Dotterels.

A couple of kilometres short of the destination, Chilean Flamingoes dotted a shallow lake ...normal, but seemed rather weird to have flamingoes and King Penguins as neighbours! Approaching the colony, things all snapped into place, barely a puff of wind, the blue sky that had sat just to the west edged in, the sun broke out.

And then we were there ...classic stuff. A huddle of grunting lumps of elegant black and white, offset with yellow-orange trimming, further penguins waddling up from the sea a few dozen metres distant. Discovered only in 2010, this colony has since increased considerably from the handful of birds then ...clustered on short turf on a bend of a small stream, a quick count revealed no less than 94 birds, some engaged in vocal squabbles with neighbours, other squatting near motionless, appearing to be incubating eggs – feet raised slightly, folds of belly fat flopping over ovoid shapes. Mostly the penguins did absolutely nothing, but every now and then another would set off for the waddle back to the sea, all quite memorizing in its own way. Really a perfect morning, a colony of near one hundred King Penguins on a fairly warm sunny day, three Magellanic Penguins also appearing in the surf beyond, a Northern Giant Petrel adding spice and an Andean Condor overhead. Also White-rumped Sandpipers here and Magellanic Oystercatchers.

And then a little bonus – trotting straight past the King Penguins and not seeming to fuss them at all, a South American Grey Fox appeared! Intent on hunting for rodents or something, it strolled up the slope and, not giving me not a slightest look, began to wander around just metres away, cocking its head to listen at clumps of tussock grass. Eventually off went the fox and, a couple of hours having passed, so too did we, heading back to Porvenir via a more coastal route.

Pairs of both Flightless Steamer-Ducks and Flying Steamer-Ducks along the way, plus several assorted waterbirds on occasional lakes (more Chilean Flamingoes, Great Grebe, White-tufted Grebe, etc). Also a lot of Guanaco, several South American Sea Lions, a pod of Dusky Dolphins and a Muskrat.

Had a break of an hour or two at Porvenir, then headed over to pools a little to the east. An ominous dark sky was now brooding, but still things looked okay. Skipped the first lake, strange landscapes of formations but seemingly to have few birds and stopped at the far end of the second – rather distant, green mats of bog and small pools seemed to be full of birds. We stopped and began to walk, dampness now in the air. One Variable Hawk on a post, then masses of White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers as we got to the wetter area, also 18 Two-banded Plovers, a Greater Yellowlegs and two South American Snipes. A fair way out, at least 500 Upland Geese headed an impressive count of wildfowl, four Spectacled Ducks rather closer, along with Yellow-billed Pintail and Chiloe Wigeon. Rain was beginning, cut and run! And that is more or less exactly what we did ...straight into a Magellanic Plover! Had a quick look at his, then headed back to the car. Day over, back to the hotel we went.

24 December. Strait of Magellan.

Day of seawatching, first off the coast near Porvenir, then from the two-hour ferry between Porvenir and Punta Arenas, then in the evening east of Punta Arenas – in all cases, the rich waters of the Strait of Magellan (the epic waterway that explorers past have ventured through from Francis Drake to Darwin).

Black-browed Albatrosses and Southern Giant Petrels cruising just off the beachfront, pods of Magellanic Penguins bobbing on the water, Wilson's Storm Petrels mid-channel, Magellanic Diving Petrels scooting past, it was excellent stuff all round, best summed up by the tallies of birds. Numbers of birds (Porvenir / ferry / Punta Arenas):

- Magellanic Penguin - 14 / 30 / 0
 Southern Giant Petrel - 15 / 25 / 70
 Black-browed Albatross - 20 / 80 / 45
 Westland Petrel - 0 / 2 / 0
 Wilson's Storm Petrel - 0 / 8 / 0
 Magellanic Diving Petrel - 4 / 12 / 0
 Rock Cormorant - 2 / 0 / 4
 Imperial Cormorant - 400+ / 50 / 40
 Flying Steamer-Duck - 8 / 0 / pair+chicks
 Chilean Skua - 50+ / 25 / 30
 Kelp Gull - com / com / com
 Dolphin Gull - 0 / 2 / 0
 Brown-hooded Gull - 0 / 3 / 0
 South American Tern - 150+ / 250+ / 300+

South American Sea Lion 1 / 2 / 0

Dusky Dolphin 2 / 0 / 0

Peale's Dolphin 0 / 0 / 1 Ended the day by booking into cabanas just east of Punta Arenas – so arrived Christmas Eve, Black-browed Albatrosses visible from the windows, Black-faced Ibises on the lawn.

25 December. Punta Delgada & South of Punta Arenas.

Target for Christmas Day – two range-restricted specials in the easternmost nook of Chile, tucked up at the far end of the Strait of Magellan abutting the Argentine border: Patagonian Mockingbird and Band-tailed Earthcreeper.

Location was about 15 km east of Punta Delgada, a shallow valley rising from the coast and dominated by extensive patches of shrubby steppe. Perfect looking habitat, I thought. Slurped down my coffee, then began my meanderings ...two Scale-throated Earthcreepers to kick things off, plus plenty of Rufous-collared Sparrows, Long-tailed Meadowlarks, Austral Negritos and other common species. Soon after arrival, I encountered a bird skulking in the depths of a particularly thick bush – a bit of a long tail here, a glimpse of a wingbar there, then a face and eye-brow, all the bits of the jigsaw piecing together to what was an unmistakable Patagonian Mockingbird! From one thicket to the next it went, then suddenly another appeared and out popped the first, it being a juvenile. A scarce bird in Chile, it was my very good fortune to stumble across a breeding pair, two adults present feeding at least one fledgling. Simultaneously though, a second species appeared and initially caused me some confusion – a pair of them, quite flighty, they were clearly shrike-tyrants, but did not seem to match Great Shrike-Tyrant, the only species that should be in the area. Dark-billed, moderate throat streaking, whitish outer tail feather and general greyish underparts, the birds were Grey-bellied Shrike-Tyrants, the nearest closest records at that time according to ebird being around the Gallegos River, about 80 km north in Argentina.

Windy, but pleasant sunshine, I continued by exploration of the bushland, Tufted Tit-Tyrants also seen, along with Southern House Wrens, Austral Thrushes, Mourning Sierra-Finch and Grey-hooded Sierra-Finch. Couldn't find a Band-tailed Earthcreeper though.

Eventually wandered back to the car and thought I would drive to the intertidal areas that I had camped alongside a few days earlier. A couple of kilometres along, in an area with dispersed bushes separated by open grassland, a small bird scampering along the ground near the base of a bush ... Band-tailed Earthcreeper! It ran and flitted to an isolated bush next to the road, vanishing into its interior. After quite some minutes of waiting for it to exit, I walked over to the bush expecting it to fly out – it didn't! Somehow, it had managed to depart without me seeing, it never reappeared! Still, that was a piece of luck, my two Christmas presents were truly now unwrapped.

Over at Punta Delgada bay, the tide was midway out, flocks of Hudsonian Godwits waded the water's edge, many dozens of Magellanic Oystercatcher also present, along with hundreds of both Baird's Sandpipers and White-rumped Sandpipers. A pair of Kelp Geese fed on kelp beds, Southern Caracaras plodded a dune embankment. Best of the lot though, feeding on weeds aside the gravel track, two Patagonian Yellow-Finches appeared for a while, my only ones of the trip. So there we have it Christmas morning 2016, pretty good in all. In addition to all the birds, I had also added another South American Grey Fox, a mother and two young Hog-nosed Skunks, a few dozen Guanicos and both Brown Hare and European Rabbit. Now past midday, I turned and drove back to Punta Arenas, a couple of hours distant. Later in the day, we decided upon an exploratory drive along the coast to the south-west of Punta Arenas. I had expected this to be a lonely road through wilderness without any people ...I had not reckoned on half of the population of Punta Arenas to be out enjoying the sunshine with Christmas barbecues! Thoughts of a Mountain Lion or something emerging soon evaporated, but it was still pretty good for birds, pairs of both Flying Steamer-Ducks and Flightless Steamer-Ducks dotted along the rocky shores, a flock of 19 Ashy-headed Geese and two Ruddy-headed Geese in a small wetland area and a Cinereous Harrier nearby. Best however was on the adjacent Strait of Magellan – first a raft of about 45 Black-browed Albatrosses sitting on the millpond condition waters, then an amazing site as no less than 110 Southern Giant Petrels all sat just off a beach. Stopping to investigate, I spied they they obviously spied, a fisherman by a hut preparing his boat. Chilean Skuas with Kelp Gulls also lingering, South American Terns further offshore. Then absolute bedlam broke out as the fisherman began tossing chopped fish waste into the sea ...clambering all over each other in a mad panic to scoff down as much as possible, it was a mass battle of wings, heads and beaks. Very obliging, the fisherman directed fish waste in my direction, a spectacle indeed as these mighty birds squabbled just metres distant, ever enhanced by an elegant Black-browed Albatross joining the scrum, along with the Chilean Skuas.

Other odds and ends during the afternoon, including both Chimango and Southern Caracaras and both Dark-bellied and Buff-winged Cinclodes, then it was back to Punta Arenas to celebrate Christmas in true style ...junk food in a petrol station cafe!

Effectively, that was the end of the Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego section, next morning we would be boarding a plane to head north.

Part Three, Chiloe Island. [CLICK HERE](#)