

Part Three. Chiloe Island

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A short stop on this island in southern Chiloe, very much planned as a break between Patagonia and the far north. As it turned out however, an excellent couple of days with plenty of waterbirds on the dramatic coasts and both Black-throated Huet-huet and a good range of tapaculos in the temperate forests.

26 December. Chiloe Island.

Last Black-browed Albatrosses and Southern Giant Petrels on the Strait of Magellan, then onto a midday flight for the two-hour hop to Puerto Montt. A different world up here, green and lush, a real temperate feel. Picked up another hire car and set off to the west, destination Chiloe Island. Three dozen Sooty Shearwaters and seven Peruvian Pelicans from the ferry, then a moderately short drive around to Calun Bay, a mighty impressive bay of intertidal mudflats and absolutely teeming with birds. One of the world's most important areas for wintering Hudsonian Godwits in particular, the bay was full of birds, not only a minimum of 1800 Hudsonian Godwits, but hundreds of other waders mingling with them, including 180 or so Hudsonian Whimbrels, several hundred Baird's Sandpipers, a few dozen Red Knot, similar numbers of Sanderling and lesser numbers of American Oystercatchers, Southern Lapwings and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. Equally impressive, 414 Black-necked Swans, at least 350 Black Skimmers and scattered other bits and bobs including a lone Flightless Steamer-Duck, seven fly-over Chilean Pigeons and rather good numbers of Chimango Caracaras.

One bird I was keen to see at this locality however was Snowy-crowned Tern, a localised species that apparently favours this bay. Loads of Kelp Gulls and Brown-hooded Gulls to sift through, a few Franklin's Gulls too. South American Terns milling around, but after about half an hour, suddenly I spotted my quarry - sat on adjacent fishing buoys, two Snowy-crowned Terns, smart birds indeed with their highway man masks. Maybe the birds had been on the buoys all along, but either way when I looked again a little later, they had gone and I never saw them again, nor the next day at this same bay.

Accommodation was beachside cabanas some kilometres west of Ancud, the route there via a moderately rough backroad from Calun to Ancud. Served its purpose though, a pair of the Chilean endemic Slender-billed Parakeets flying over midway. That aside, the track was actually fairly birdless, the odd Fire-eyed Diucon here and there, a few Long-tailed Meadowlarks also. A bit of compulsory R&R at the cabin, then a meander further west to the wonderful beach at Punihue. Here I finished the day, Blackish Oystercatchers trotting along the beach to the backdrop of Punihue Island and its associated rocky islets. Only mere metres across the surf, a parade of Magellanic Penguins clambered up the rocky slopes of the island, other standing at entrances to burrows. Amongst them, at the very south of their range, a couple of Humboldt Penguins, plus a good mix of other seabirds, Kelp Geese and Flightless Steamer-Ducks included, plus at least 50 Red-legged Cormorants, six Rock Cormorants, four Neotropic Cormorants and 25 Imperial Cormorants.

27 December. Chiloe Island. In the green lush lands of Chiloe interior, a biological station now stands to mark the former haunts of Charles Darwin, a reserve that protects a thick mass of riverine and bamboo forest. And so it was, dawn at the Estacion Biologica Senda Darwin, calls of Chucao Tapaculo rising from streamside tangles, raucous squawks of three Slender-billed Parakeets flying over. My targets here were all elusive birds of weird and wonderful names, birds that favoured the forest depths and, even if found, would be a challenge to see. Top of this list of desired species was Black-throated Huet-huet, not far behind were Chucao Tapaculo, Magellanic Tapaculo and, a dream bird if ever there was one, Des Muirs' Wiretail. A little beyond the actual station, a short circular trail leads through some prime habitat – initially mature forest with a moderately open understorey, then through dense bamboo growths along a stream. I walked a full circuit of the trail, I did see Thorn-tailed Rayadito, White-crested Elaenia and Tufted Tit-Tyrants, I did not see any of the desired birds (but did hear Chucao Tapaculo again). Hmmph, I decided I would walk it again. It was now a good hour after dawn and the forest did appear to be waking up – it had been eerily quiet in the dark depths of the forest, but certainly now a lot more things were actively calling. I could hear yet another Chucao Tapaculo and as I reentered the area dominated by mature trees, an unmistakable call of a Black-throated Huet-huet began to echo out. My description of it being an open area was perhaps overly optimistic – the reality was tangles of creepers, fallen branches and understorey plants, patches of open leaf litter separating them. And it was exactly in one of these jumbles of branches and green stuff, only a few metres from the trail, that the huet-huet was lurking. Relocating a little, I decided to just sit myself on the ground and wait. Rustling of leaves, shudderingly loud call, it was still there ...and then the first glimpses. Fat dumpy thing strutting across the leaf litter, jumping up moss-covered boughs blocking its path. Didn't respond to pishing, but it did continue to root about and eventually strutted right across the open path next to me, a Black-throated Huet-huet in all its glory. Maybe because of me, it then did a pretty good sprint across to an adjacent area of good cover, all further views being restricted to brief glimpses. So onward, my strategy was now to walk a few metres and sit a while, listening and watching for movement, then repeat. Didn't see or hear anymore huet-huets, but at the bamboo growths along the stream, I finally got to see a couple of Chucao Tapaculos as they edged up through low vegetation. Better was to come however – stopping at the furthestmost point of the trail, suddenly a little tiny grey thing zipped across the path behind me. Wasn't entirely sure it wasn't a mouse, but there it was again, a diminutive little bird creeping along the ground through hanging vegetation. Back and fro across the path several times, perhaps visiting a nest, the bird was a Magellanic Tapaculo, a super little thing. And then, right while I was watching this, a weak call from thicker vegetation to the one side caught my attention. Stuck my head into the undergrowth and there

was a small orangy bird with a tail extraordinaire ...Des Muir's Wiretail!

What a good morning, stayed a while longer, adding three Green-backed Firecrowns to the day's tally, then headed back to Calun Bay (basically the same birds as the day before, minus any Snowy-crowned Terns) and thereafter to the cabin. It was now hot and sunny, so thoughts of adding Chile's last-remaining tapaculo to the haul were cast aside, basically zero chance I thought.

Instead, we decided to head back to Punihuel and take one of the little boat trips around the islets to see the penguins et al. I was harbouring hopes of seeing Marine Otters, but they had reportedly been scarce of late and we did not encounter one. It was however a very pleasant trip and there was a Humpback Whale doing some tail splashes as quite ample compensation for the lack of Marine Otter. Loads of Magellanic Penguins close to, a single Humboldt Penguin this day, plus several Kelp Geese, a Peruvian Pelican and plenty of Red-legged Cormorants in particular. Back on dry land, so ended another day, this time touring a number of headlands and beaches, watching Peale's Dolphins jumping in the surf, a little group of Elegant Terns off one headland and a good general assortment of other stuff.

28 December. Chiloe Island.

Final day on Chiloe and final target – Ochre-flanked Tapaculo. Had checked out a few bits of possible habitat the previous afternoon and steep bamboo-clad slopes flanking a small bay just three kilometres from our cabin seemed just perfect. A bit of hazy mist at dawn, already several Chucao Tapaculos in good voice, two actually hopping along at the beachline where thick vegetation hung down. Dark-bellied Cinclodes jumping about on the rocks, haunting calls of two Black-throated Huet-huets somewhere on the upper slopes.

Heard an Ochre-rumped Tapaculo after about 15 minutes, but short of waddling through thick squelchy estuarine mud there seemed no real chance of seeing that one. Followed a small track down the side of the bay, nice bamboo clumps growing high either side. No sign of a Ochre-rumped Tapaculo here, but where the track ended, one was calling very nearby, again seeming to be hanging out where thick vegetation actually hung over the mud of the bay. This proved to be a real skulker, it was actively moving between two adjacent patches of thicker vegetation, but generally was perfectly able of getting from one to the other unseen. Sat on a rock for quite a while here, a couple of Black-crowned Night Herons as company, and eventually got an amalgamation of views of the Ochre-rumped Tapaculo – flat head, orangy vent, basic silhouette. Only on one occasion did I get a full view when it briefly paused on an exposed twig before slipping back into thicker cover. And with that, I had now managed the full suite of Chilean huet-huets, tapaculos and allies! Ringed Kingfisher as a parting gift, then a drive across the island back to the ferry terminal. Very good crossing back to the mainland, the highlights of which were 12 Magellanic Penguins on the water, at least 40 Pincoya Storm Petrels milling mid-channel and 15 or so Sooty Shearwaters passing by. On the mainland side, both Flying and Flightless Steamer-Ducks, plus a mix of gulls, several Peruvian Pelicans and no less than 20 South American Fur Seals. Realising we were now rather late, it was then a bit of a dash back to Puerto Montt airport where we dropped the car and checked in for our next flight. At 3 p.m., we departed for the two-hour flight to Santiago, connecting later with a slightly longer flight to Arica. Arrived at 11.30 pm, a mere couple of kilometres south of the Peruvian border. Wonderfully warm, palm trees lining the road as we headed into the city, part four of the trip was about to begin. Part Four, The North.

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