

Mammal Trip in Chile

20th to 27th November 2017



Leader: Rodrigo Silva

Participant: Stewart Summers

Albatross Birding & Nature Tours

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OVERVIEW

This is report of Stewart Summers's private extension tour, which took place after his birding trip in Chile with the international birding company Vent. During their main birding trip they covered central, lake and Patagonian part of the country. Nevertheless, we returned to some of these sections with the aim to focus on mammal searching.

We spent a total of 8 days looking for mammals at the following three areas of the country, main habitat and cities of reference are provided:

- Lake district: 3 ½ days exploring **Southern temperate forest**, around Puerto Montt.
- Central region: 1 ½ days at the **Mediterranean brushland** or **Central Chile matorral**, around Santiago.
- Northern section: 2 ½ days in **Pre-puna** and **Altiplano**, around Arica.

Although their main trip was focused on birding, they managed to spot some mammals listed, so by the time we ran the trip we didn't put much effort in looking for them: **Fence Degu**, **coruro**, **Commerson's dolphin**, **culpeo fox**, **Humboldt's hog-nosed skunk**, **guanaco**... and a total of 8 **pumas** (!) in world-famous Torres del Paine National Park.

As a result we turned our efforts into the remaining list of mammals, including several range restricted, cryptic and sought-after species. Some of them were **monito del monte**, the single living species in his order and closely related with Australian marsupials, **Highland tuco-tuco**, and representative of Ctenomyidae, a new family on Stewart's list, **Darwin's fox**, an endemic and endangered species, and **Southern Pudu**, the smallest deer in the world (Cervidae). Hard task and a whole lot of challenge in terms of planning!

Trip was led by [Rodrigo Silva](#), who is experienced in mammal searching and has led birding tours for five years now all over Chile, but he had never guided a mammal trip before.

ITINERARY

November 20th, Monday:

Rodrigo picked up Stewart at hotel near Santiago's airport and together they headed to Puerto Montt. Once they arrived, they drove to Pargua, where the ferry crosses to Chilóe Island. They then headed to Puñihuil and navigated for about an hour, searching for Marine Otter. After that they headed north, where rested before going to the first spot-lighting session in renewal patch of forest also known as habitat of monito del monte.

November 21st, Tuesday:

Early in the morning they drove to Chepu and took a boat trip in search of southern river otter and other goodies such as Darwin's fox, kodkod and pudu. After that they walked along Pacific coast towards Ahuenco, area of Darwin's fox sightings. After lunch they headed south to Tepuhueico, a private conservation initiative, which preserves 20.000 has of impenetrable and unexplored native forest. There they spent the following two nights, using night time for spotlighting sessions.

November 22nd, Wednesday:

This day started with walking on trails around the hotel in Tepuhueico during the early morning breakfast. After that they had breakfast and did short boat trip, which allowed them to reach a boardwalk and then a trail, where they spent the whole morning in great habitat of kodkod and Darwin's fox. They also had the chance to look for southern river otter in a little stream that drains into the lake. After lunch they went out again and gave mammals a chance to show themselves, after dinner was time for spot-lighting session.

November 23rd, Thursday:

It was the last attempt in the forest before going back to mainland and catching noon flight to Santiago. They continued mammal watching heading towards southeast from Santiago, in order to reach Andes foothills in Cajón del Maipo. After hotel check in and relaxing for a while they went out for a spotlighting session in private reserve located nearby.

November 24th, Friday:

This morning they visited the lower section of Yeso Valley, a well-known location for birders as the spot to look for the sought-after Diademed Sandpiper Plover, probably one of the best in the world! After lunch they had some rest and then they spent evening exploring rocky slopes with the aim to find Mountain Vizcacha. During the night they tried again for fat-tailed mouse opossum at different location, this time on the way to Lagunillas.

November 25th, Saturday:

Day started with morning flight to Arica and then drive to Putre. They had brief rest and then headed to the lower part of Lauca National Park, its elevation is “just” at 15,000 feet. They took the way back to Putre and after dinner had a spot-lighting session in surroundings of the village.

November 26th, Sunday:

They left to Surire salt flats carrying box lunches and spent the whole day in good habitat for Andean hairy armadillo and Highland tuco-tuco. Although there is no reasonable way to spot it in a single day, they gave a chance to Andean cat to show up. On the way back they took a shortcut to Chungará Lake, one of the highest lakes in the world, and then came back to Putre around dinner time. After dinner they went out again for the last spot-lighting session of the trip.

November 27th, Monday:

They had last shot in mammals searching few hours before driving back to Arica, and catching an afternoon flight back to Santiago. They arrived safe and sound about 5 o'clock, few hours before Stewart's overnight flight to Australia.

MAMMAL LIST

This is list of mammal species with comments, which passenger or guide saw during the 8 day trip, including some of which their ID is not totally clear but is very likely.

- **Monito del monte (*Dromiciops gliroides*)**¹: It was the main target of the trip and we sadly have to say we dip on that, even spending 3 nights spot-lighting for it. First night Rodrigo got a good eye reflection in a renewal forest, north of Chiloé Island. The animal stayed for 10-15 seconds in a quite exposed branch before to go down holding the same branch with slow movements, 2 meters away from the path, in a bamboo thickets patch. Because of habitat, size, reflection intensity and behavior we are quite sure it was a Monito, but Stewart, who was standing just one meter from the guide was blocked and couldn't find it. Second night both were able to spot an eye-shine of proper size and intensity, but the animal went away before they could see details.
- **Cinnamon Red Bat (*Lasiurus varius*)**: A few individuals were seen hunting over a little stream in the north of Chiloé Island, during our first night excursion. As long as they were active when some sunlight last, we were able to make a good ID.
- **Chilean Myotis (*Myotis chiloensis*)**: Some individuals taking advantage of our torches to feed on insects were attracted during night walks in Tepuhueico. ID based in color, size and shape of the few individuals well seen.
- **Mountain Vizcacha (*Lagidium viscacia*)**: Lumped into one taxa with Northern Vizcacha (*Lagidium peruanum*). We tried for it in El Yeso and Cajón del Maipo, but we had no success there. We finally had terrific views of several individuals in Lauca National Park, where the species is common and quite confident about people.
- **Coypu (*Myocastor coypus*)**: We had the unusual sighting of an individual walking through a path during night time, in Tepuhueico (just as it was supposed to spot Darwin's Fox or Kodkod).
- **Highland Tuco-tuco (*Ctenomys opimus*)**: It took us a long time to find an active colony of Tuco-tuco, but we finally made it in the way from Putre to Salar de Surire. Then the challenge was to spot an individual outside of his burrow. Finally we had gorgeous views of it during our last minutes on the field.
- **Peale's Dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus australis*)**: Daily sightings at Chiloé Island.
- **Darwin's Fox (*Lycalopex fulvipes*)**: An endangered species with an estimated world population of ~650 to 2500 individuals. Restricted to Chiloé Island and Nahuelbuta Coastal range, but recent records confirm the presence of the species in the Valdivian coastal range (Vila *et al.* 2004, D'Elia *et al.* 2013, Farías *et al.* 2014). We tried looking for it in two of the better locations known for the species, but his small size, low densities and dense vegetated habitat used made the search a hard task. In Tepuhueico where not that long

¹ D'Elía et al (2016) have proposed to split Monito del Monte into three different taxa based on morphological features consistent with phylogeographic patterns.

ago was seen daily around the lodge, we found area with several signs as feces and footprints. During third night within his distributional range, just meanwhile the team was preparing for spot-lighting session, Rodrigo briefly saw an individual into the grass field around the hotel. Short-legged structure, small size and proportionally large ears, despite the fact is the only fox at the Island, make us sure about ID.

- **Culpeo Fox (*Lycalopex culpaeus*):** We briefly spotted an individual crossing the road just in front of our car, on the way from Putre to Lauca NP.
- **Marine Otter (*Lontra felina*):** It took us longer than we thought but we finally spotted a very busy individual in Puñihuil, where the species were normally daily seen.
- **Southamerican Sea Lion (*Otaria flavescens*):** Common and daily seen at Chiloé Island.
- **Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*):** Daily seen at high elevations of the northern section of the trip. Some large groups seen on the way to Surire and a fun-behaved herd came towards us in Lauca NP.
- **Southern Pudu (*Pudu puda*):** It was quite abundant around Tepuhueico Lodge, where we saw +5 individuals each night we went out during night time for spotlighting.
- **North Andean Deer (*Hippocamelus antisensis*):** Chilean population is estimated in less than 1000 individuals. During our first night spotlighting around Putre we spotted 2 groups of Tarukas, as it is called in native language. One of three individuals and then a bigger one of about 6-7. Both groups were feeding into an agricultural field.

Here are some comments on species we did not see, but is worthwhile commenting on them:

- **Fat-tailed Mousse Opossum (*Thylamys elegans*):** We spent two nights spot-lighting for it with no success. Although there are quite a few records of individuals being caught by cats or found inside houses at Cajón del Maipo, the area where we tried, it was impossible to spot it.
- **Kodkod (*Leopardus guigna*):** Chiloé Island is well known to be probably the best place to look for the smallest wildcat in the Americas, and Tepuhueico has had daily sightings for a while, although this seems to have changed in last few days. We finally dip into this species, but it looks very promising to keep trying for the species at this area.
- **Andean Cat (*Leopardus jacobita*):** Most of records for the species come from around Surire area.
- **Southern River Otter (*Lontra provocax*):** We made 3 hour boat trip where it has been recorded for several years. Also tried in Tepuhueico, where we navigated and walked through good habitat. In the last place we found an area with otter-like feces, but we had no more success than that.

Although we were focused on mammals we managed to spot some birds crossing our steps. Some specialties that deserve mentioning are: Lesser Rhea, Puna Tinamou, Ornate Tinamou, Kelp Goose, Andean Goose, Flightless Steamer Duck, Puna Teal, Spectackled Duck, Humboldt and Magellanic Penguin, Black-browed Albatross, Southern Giant Petrel, Red-legged Cormorant, Stripe-backed Bittern, Chilean, Andean and Jame's Flamingo, Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, Aplomado Falcon, Andean and Giant Coot, Andean Lapwing, Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, Andean Avocet, Peruvian Thick-Knee, Hudsonian Godwit, Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, Snowy-crowned Tern, Black Skimmer, Slender-billed Parakeet, Band-winged Nightjar, Ruffous-legged Owl, Andean Hillstar. Into the passerines we saw some goodies as White-throated Treerunner, Chucao Tapaculo, Rufous-naped Ground-Tyrant, Rufous-tailed Plantcutter and White-winged Diuca Finch.