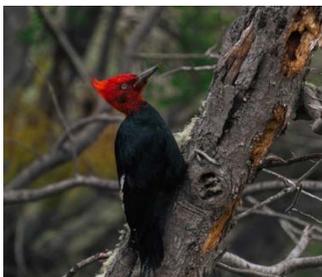


Ultimate Patagonia | Oct.20 – Nov.2, 2023 Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With Naturalist Journeys' guide Wes Larson, local guides Ruben, Victor, Nana and Xavier and participants: Eric, Elissa, George, Jeff, John, Laura, Nancy and Patti



Fri., Oct. 20

Arrivals in Buenos Aires

Our group met up midday at the Palo Santo Hotel where our first official activity together was walking to a nearby restaurant for some delicious Argentine barbeque. Argentina is globally renowned for its beef, and many participants in our group raved about the delicious meal. We then returned to the hotel to grab our gear and get ready for some birding. Our birding excursion took us to the Costanera do Sur Park in Buenos Aires, which ended up being a very productive as we managed to find over 50 species of birds in a little over two hours! Some highlights included Silver Teal, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, White-tufted Grebe, Rosy-billed Pochard, Harris's Hawk and many, many more. Everywhere we turned there was a new bird, and many were species that we likely



would not see anywhere else in Argentina, so it was a real treat. Following the trip to the park, we returned to the hotel and reviewed our species list, then we enjoyed a nice dinner at the impressive hotel restaurant. A great first day with a wonderful group!

Sat., Oct. 21 Buenos Aires | Trelew | Puerto Piramides

After a great breakfast at the Palo Santo hotel, we packed up and bid farewell to Buenos Aires and northern Argentina. We were on our way to Patagonia, and the excitement in the group was palpable. Arriving in Trelew, we met our local guide Ruben, and headed to a nearby park that would be our first stop. The waterway in the park was absolutely full of waterfowl, and we had great looks at Red Shovelers, Coscoroba Swans, Lake Ducks, Chiloe Widgeon, Black-headed Ducks, White-winged Coots and many more. We then ate a box lunch and headed for a small riparian area to search for Many-colored Rush-Tyrant. While that tyrant didn't show up, we did see Spectacled Tyrant, White Monjita, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Grassland Yellow-Finch, among others. It was a nice introduction to the general topography in the area, and the biggest surprise was yet to come.

As we drove down a dirt road, we came to a body of water that had a thick pink line running through it. Flamingos! There were thousands and thousands of Chilean Flamingos in the water, the sheer size of the flock exceeded our expectations. We sat for a while in the wind watching the beautiful birds, and on our walk back, we celebrated our good luck to see so many of these charismatic birds in one place, truly an unforgettable sighting! We then drove to the coastal village of Puerto Piramides, and along the way saw a few other birds and our first guanacos. Arriving in the village, we settled into our quaint accommodations near the beach and had dinner in the seaside, whale-watching paradise.

Sun., Oct. 22 Full Day on the Valdez Peninsula

We woke early for a sunrise walk on the beach. We saw American Oystercatcher, Long-tailed Meadowlark and a few other species, then enjoyed breakfast in our lodge. Next, we made a short drive to a nearby overlook where we saw more oystercatchers, South American Terns, Dolphin and Kelp Gulls, Black-faced Shearwaters and many



cormorants. We also saw a group of South American sea lions and some southern right whales in the bay. It was a great stop and we all marveled at the large amount of life in the area.

Arriving back in Puerto Piramides, we embarked on a whale watching excursion. In no time we found a mother southern right whale with a calf, and we followed the pair for over an hour, watching them surface and play. It was an up-close experience with one of the most impressive whales in the world, and surely an encounter we will all remember. When we got back to the hotel, we finally met up with Laura and George, who unfortunately experienced some travel delays. Now our group was complete! We drove to the far northern end of the peninsula where we were treated to an especially dynamic elephant seal sighting, as a male mated with a female seal on the beach. The stop also produced a hairy armadillo, a Patagonian grey fox and some great birds like the Diuca Finch. It was a wonderful drive with great company, and all of us happily went over the species list at dinner.

Mon., Oct. 23 Full Day on the Valdez Peninsula

Today we had another full day exploring the Valdez, and we had wonderful weather the entire day. Wonderful for Patagonia at least! We left after breakfast, driving to the east side of the peninsula, but it took us a while to get there as we were having some amazing sightings along the way. We saw Patagonian Mara, Lesser Rhea and even a very close Patagonia skunk. Other birds included Cinereous Harrier, Common Miner and Lesser Shrike-Tyrant. We also had some very nice views of Elegant-crested Tinamous, which are quite plentiful in the area.

As we approached the coast, we all scanned the water for orcas, and although none of the cetaceans appeared today, we had a lovely lunch on the top floor of a coastal restaurant where we gazed out onto the beautiful blue Atlantic Ocean. Our next stop would be our favorite of the day, as we got to have an up-close view of Magellanic Penguins at a small colony along the road. All of us were quite surprised by just how close the little penguins were, and it was a real treat for many of our group that had never seen wild penguins before. We had been going full steam since arriving in Trelew, so as we loaded back into the van many of the group took some naps



on the way back to Puerto Piramides and some well-earned down time. After a few hours relaxing in the small coastal village, we once again headed to the Paradise Restaurant on the hill where we enjoyed a great dinner and some equally great conservation and laughs.

Tues., Oct. 24 Punta Tombo | Travel to Ushuaia

We woke up very early this morning to leave Puerto Piramides and head back toward Trelew. On the way, we stopped at a life-sized replica of a titanosaur, a large sauropod dinosaur that was discovered in Patagonia, then stopped for breakfast at a gas station café. We needed to make good time because we had a special stop planned before departing Trelew.

The stop was Punta Tombo, a narrow strip of land extending out into the Atlantic Ocean that is home to a large colony of Magellanic Penguins. The boardwalk to the ocean winds through areas that are home to hundreds, if not thousands, of penguin burrows, and the charismatic birds were everywhere. We also were lucky to see several other target species including Tufted Tit-Tyrant and White-headed Steamer Duck. It was a wonderful stop, and we were all very happy to have such an up-close experience with the beautiful, easy-to-love penguins.

Following the trip to Punta Tombo, we returned to Trelew for our flights south to Ushuaia and Tierra del Fuego, the end of the world! We marveled at the dramatic mountains and vistas as we approached the small city on the Beagle Channel. It felt as though we were entering another world as we left the airport, surrounded by dramatic mountains on both sides of the channel, and we excitedly poured over the details of the city and natural surroundings as we headed to our seaside hotel. After reviewing our species list and a lovely dinner, we headed to bed excited for what was to come on our first full day in Tierra del Fuego.

Wed., Oct. 25 Full Day in Ushuaia

Another early morning to do some seaside birding. We saw a lot of waterfowl and shorebirds including Upland Geese, Ashy-headed Geese and Magellanic Oystercatchers. After breakfast at the hotel, we loaded into the van to do some birding in natural areas on the fringe of the city. As we approached our first stop, a flash of red in the



forest was enough to make us stop. We quickly exited the van and were treated to a very long and satisfying look at two male Magellanic Woodpeckers! These beautiful woodpeckers are quite large with an almost unbelievable crimson head and bright yellow eyes. We explored this area a bit and saw more woodpeckers as well as Tufted Tit-Tyrants, Austral Negrito, Austral Parakeet, Patagonian Sierra-Finches and a ton of other new birds. It was a very productive day despite the temperamental weather.

We then headed to lunch in the city, and while we were there, we got word that the weather was too bad for our scheduled boat excursion. Rather than go back to the hotel, we visited a local dump in hopes of seeing White-throated Caracara, which we quickly found, as well as two other species of caracara. On the way back, we stopped at a site where we located Dark-bellied Cinclodes, as well as an amazing look at a Magellanic Cormorant with bright blue eyes. Even though the weather was uncooperative, we had really productive birding, and everyone was excited to gather back at the hotel and go over the list from the day over dinner and drinks.

Thurs., Oct. 26 Tierra Del Fuego National Park | Beagle Channel

After breakfast at the hotel, we loaded into the van and headed to Tierra Del Fuego National Park. On the drive, we were treated to amazing vistas, and the fresh snow on the towering mountains created especially scenic conditions. As we drove through the park, we marveled at the plant life and the gorgeous meadows and valleys. We made our way to the final stop in the park, which also happened to be the end of the Pan-American Highway!

A short hike through the park and along the channel proved to be great for birding. We saw a soaring Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Fire-eyed Diucon, Austral Blackbird, Austral Pygmy-Owl and a number of other really great birds. The owl really put on a show for us in beautiful conditions and light. As we walked along the water, we admired some Flightless Steamer Ducks and Crested Ducks until the snow began to pick up and we made a hasty retreat to the van.

We drove back through the park and stopped for coffee at the Visitors Center, then ate a delicious sack lunch on the shore of a beautiful lake. A cheeky Chimango Caracara joined us, perching quite close as it eyed our lunch. After eating, we exited the park and made a quick stop at the hotel before heading to our next excursion, a



catamaran ride on the beagle channel. The wind was blowing quite hard, and it was pretty chilly, but the low clouds and light were absolutely beautiful, and we had jaw-dropping views of the snow-covered mountains surrounding the channel. When we got to the lighthouse, we saw thousands of birds including large colonies of Imperial Cormorants, Kelp Gulls, sheathbills and others, plus a large group of South American sea lions. The real showstopper, however, was the Black-browed Albatross that followed the boat back to the harbor, giving our photographers a chance for some very nice photos. It was a perfect day at the end of the world, and we all enjoyed another great meal and even better company as we bid farewell to this part of the trip and Argentina.

Fri., Oct. 27 **Travel to Chile | Torres Del Paine**

After a final breakfast in Argentina, we headed to the Ushuaia airport and caught a flight to Calafate, near the Chilean border. It was then a long drive through the high windy plains of Argentina on our route to Torres Del Paine. Along the way, we spotted several birds and mammals including guanacos, Chilean Flamingos, Andean Condors and even a Magellanic Snipe. Even though it was a travel day, and we also had to deal with the border crossing into Chile, the views were spectacular, and the drive was beautiful, so there were no complaints. After arriving in Chile, we settled into our hotel near Torres Del Paine National Park and had a tasty dinner while we listened to one of the puma trackers tell us the plan for the following day. It was very exciting to say the least, and all of us were ready to go see one of the main target mammals for the trip!

Sat., Oct. 28 **Full Day Looking for Pumas at Laguna Amarga**

We had a very early start this morning to give us a chance of seeing a puma! As we drove to the ranch with our guides Victor and Nana, we were cautiously optimistic about our chances to see these elusive cats. Victor had seen a younger male in an area of the ranch the night before, and he thought it best that we go search it in that location. His hunch was a good one! We found the beautiful cat laying down in some brush, and about half an hour later, it got up and returned to a recent guanaco kill while we watched. Under Victor's guidance, we followed the puma up the hill where it turned and walked right in front of our group before urinating and defecating about 40 yards away. It was truly amazing to see it so close! After the cat walked off, we returned to the cars and had breakfast, comparing photos and sharing our joy at the sighting.



We then went into Torres Del Paine Park to do some birding. We found a Chilean Flicker, the only new bird for the day, as we were focused on pumas. Returning to the lodge, we had lunch and many of us took a nap, then we piled back into the vehicles and returned to the ranch to search for more pumas. And we were rewarded once again! We could hear a group of guanacos giving their alarm call, and one of our cars located a young female puma, which we all then watched while she laid in some nearby brush. As we watched, we heard alarms from other guanacos, which made our guides think that another puma may be nearby. Sure enough, the most famous puma in the area, “Pataka,” showed up, walking about 20 feet from some of our group on her way to try to hunt guanacos. It was a completely exhilarating minute or two, and we could hardly believe our good luck. Pataka disappeared moments later, and we returned our attention to the other puma laying in the bushes. Then we decided to return to the lodge and celebrate our good fortune! We even had a round of calafate sours to mark the occasion.

Sun., Oct. 29 Pumas in the Morning | Mountains in the Evening

Any morning where you get to wake up and look for one of the world’s most beautiful and elusive mammals is a good morning, but it’s especially great when it’s in a place as beautiful as the Laguna Amarga Ranch. We headed out early once more with Victor and Nana, this time fully enjoying the beautiful views of the Torres Del Paine towers as we drove around the ranch among the guanacos. After about an hour of searching, Nana located a cached guanaco kill and then two pumas not far away, hiding behind a rock. The cats were well-fed and quite lazy as a result, but the surroundings couldn’t have been more beautiful, and we enjoyed our breakfast nearby as we watched the two lounging pumas.

Back at the hotel, we ate a last lunch and enjoyed some of the incredible sopapillas that were served with each meal, then departed for a leisurely drive to the west side of the mountains and the main entrance to Torres Del Paine National Park. Along the way we did some birding, getting great views of Chilean Flamingos, Chilean Swallows, Black-necked Swan, and our first plantcutter. The drive was beautiful, and we were all pretty blown away when we arrived at the Del Paine Hotel and the view in front of us. The hotel and valley form a mountain paradise, and we couldn’t wait to get started exploring the park the next day.



Mon., Oct. 30 **Full Day in Torres Del Paine National Park**

We woke to fresh snow and therefore had to rearrange the day's schedule a bit. The plan had been to spend the day in Torres Del Paine National Park, but the snow was a challenge, so instead we enjoyed a leisurely morning at our wonderful riverside hotel! Later the weather improved, and we set off for the park. Along the way we did a lot of birding and had nice looks at many birds in the snow. We found Patagonian Sierra-Finches, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles, Fire-eyed Diucons and many others.

We ate a delicious lunch near Lago Grey, then set out on a short hike just as the clouds started to clear and the famous peaks of Torres Del Paine poked out from the clouds. We hiked to an area where we could see floating icebergs in the distance and a distant glacier. Then we returned to the car where we found Austral Parakeet and courting Magellanic Snipe. The views were astounding as we headed back to the hotel, and Wes insisted that we stop at a nearby lake for some photos. While the day had started somewhat gloomy, the evening proved to be one of the most beautiful yet, and all of us marveled at the gorgeous mountains as we looked through the large windows in the dining area that night.

Tues., Oct. 31 **Morning in Torres Del Paine | Puerto Natales**

We woke to crisp temperatures and clear skies, and the mountains, shrouded in fog, were absolutely spectacular. After a final breakfast at the hotel, we loaded up our things and set out to explore the park a bit more. Torres Del Paine is famous for its jagged peaks and breathtaking vistas, and there was no shortage of those today. As we traveled from lake to lake and scenic spot to scenic spot, we also picked up some great birds along the way, including a great look at the male Rufous-tailed Plantcutter! As we got closer and closer to the mountains, each viewpoint was more incredible than the last, and we could hardly believe the amazing weather we had as well. It's not often we get clear skies in Patagonia, and we quite fortunate on this trip!

We ate lunch in the mountains and a pair of Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles swooped in and did a fly-by about 50 meters from us. It was a perfect end to our time in the national park, and the gorgeous mountains, lakes and glaciers left a poignant impression on all of us. We then got back in the van and made the drive to Puerto Natales, stopping a few times on the way for some quick birding. We arrived in the quaint town of Puerto



Natales in the evening and had some down time before walking to dinner at a traditional Chilean BBQ, which was delicious. We then did our species list back at the hotel and some of the group decided to walk down the road to a locally famous gelato spot. It was Halloween and the town was alive with both familial and more rambunctious festivities, and it was a great experience to see the entire community out on the streets.

Wed., Nov. 1 Leaving Puerto Natales | Eye Level with Condors

This morning we got up and did some birding in the grasslands and waterways around the Puerto Natales area. There is a nice mix of ecosystems here and we were able to see a large variety of songbirds, waterfowl and raptors with some highlights including Rufous-tailed Plantcutters, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles, Long-tailed Meadowlarks, Chiloe Widgeon. It was a great morning, and we also found a hog-nosed skunk that wasn't happy with our van and did a nice little defensive display. We ate lunch back in Puerto Natales at a local pizza café, and then we loaded into the van for the trip to Punta Arenas. But we had one important stop to make along the way. A couple hours into the journey we stopped at the Olga Teresa farm where we climbed a steep hill that afforded us eye-level observation of the biggest condor species in the world, the Andean Condor. The climb was strenuous, but the reward was worth it, and we were all stunned watching these graceful birds soar on the thermals at eye level. It's easy to see why these birds are the national bird for so many South American countries. After hiking back down to the van, we completed the drive to Punta Arenas and checked into our hotel near the seashore. We had dinner at the hotel, then settled into our rooms after a lively checklist and a quick outline of the day to come.

Thurs., Nov. 2 Full Day in Punta Arenas | Departures

Rather than visit the penguin colony today, our group opted for some birding around Punta Arenas in the hopes of picking up a new bird or two, with the Ruddy-headed Goose being a main target. The morning was very windy, and although the conditions were cold, we enjoyed more great looks at a particularly photogenic Tufted Tit-Tyrant and a beautiful Long-tailed Meadowlark. We also got a nice, up-close view of some flamingos in a city pond, and the photographers on the trip were happy to have a great photo opportunity of this iconic Chilean bird.



Next, we drove to the Fuerte Bulnes Park. The weather improved and we had great views of the Strait of Magellan and the surrounding woodlands. After a quick tour of the historic fort, we spotted soaring Black-browed Albatrosses out over the water and walked out on a viewpoint to watch them. Then, luckily, we also spotted our target bird of the day, the Ruddy-headed Goose! A solitary goose standing on some rocks down by the water gave us a long look at its beautiful plumage and pattern. We continued touring the fort, walking through the forest and noticing a lot of the birds that had been constant companions throughout the trip. A short coastal walk was next, and the day had turned quite beautiful, and the walk was a nice way to see the Strait of Magellan up close. Next, we went to the Visitor Center where we had a nice lunch and visited the park museum. Our last official excursion was to visit the full-scale replicas of the Nao Victoria and Beagle ships. Both ships played important roles in the exploration of the Strait of Magellan, and it was interesting to explore the ships and learn how cramped and difficult those voyages must have been. We had several history buffs on this trip, so it was a great stop for all of us.

At our farewell dinner, each participant picked their top three birds and top three mammals from the trip, with the Magellanic Woodpecker and puma taking the top spots. We were very lucky this trip with both weather and sightings, but I think the luckiest aspect was that we had such a pleasant group to travel with. There was a friendly and happy spirit in the vans, on the trails and in the hotels, and it was due to a group of travelers that were kind, inquisitive and fun to be around. Thank you all for making this such a special trip, and I hope to see you soon on another Naturalist Journeys adventure!

Blue-and-yellow Tanager (WL), Ruffescent Tiger Heron (WL), White-tufted Grebe (WL), Flamingoes & Kelp Gulls (WL), Argentine Tegu (WL), Saffron Finch (WL), Southern Elephant Seal cuddling (WL), Xavier spotting whales (Jeffrey Shreiner - JS), Elissa & Eric (JS), Kelp Gull (Jack Jordan - JJ), Right Whale Mother & Calf (JS), Magellanic Penguin (WL), Patagonian Mara Family (WL), Elegant Crested Tinamou (George Bakken - GB), Tufted Tit Tyrant (WL), Chimango Caracara (WL), Lesser Rhea (JJ), Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunk (WL), Scenic (JJ), Flightless Steamer Ducks (WL), Dark-faced Ground-tyrant (JJ), Austral Pygmy-owl (GB), Ashy-headed Goose (WL), Black-faced Ibis (JJ), Imperial Cormorant (WL), Ushuaia in Sunlight (WL), South American Sea Lions (JJ), Patagonian Gray Fox (WL), Black-browed Albatross (GB), Puma (WL), Group (WL), Caracara & Mountains (WL), Fire-eyed Diucon (JJ), Patagonian Sierra Finch (WL), Austral Parakeet (WL), Torres del Paine morning moon (WL), White-crested Elaenia (JJ), Group Scenic (WL), Mountain Scene (JJ), Andean Condor (WL), Long-tailed Meadowlark (WL), Taking in the landscape (JJ), Chilean Flamingo (WL)