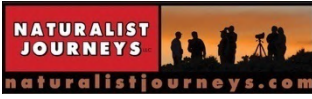


Ultimate Patagonia | Oct. 20 – Nov. 3, 2024

Trip Report by Hugh Simmons



Guide Xavier Munoz and Geri, Gerry, Norma, Tim, Vicki, and Guide Hugh



October 20 Arrive in Buenos Aires | Costanera Ecological Preserve

Arrival! After the last of us arrived on early flights, we checked into our hotel, the AWWA Hotel and Spa in Buenos Aires. We gathered at 12:30 pm for introductions and orientation for the next couple of days by our guide, Xavier Munoz. We then walked a few blocks to lunch at a lovely boutique restaurant, La Josefina.

In the afternoon we took a 20-minute drive through Buenos Aires to the Costanera Ecological Preserve. It was Mother's Day and the promenade outside the park was packed with vendors, food trucks and families enjoying an afternoon in the park. This huge park within Buenos Aires and on the edge of the bay was rich in birdlife. Passing through the gates of the preserve we quickly saw Rosy-billed Pochard, Common Gallinule, Eared Dove, Red-crested Cardinal, Monk Parakeet, Grayish Baywing, and Rufous-bellied Thrush. We followed the paved path



with an expansive wetland on the right and a large open pond on the left. A three-foot Black and White Tegu crossed the path behind us. After making several stops to survey the wetland we had seen Limpkin, Neotropic Cormorant, Bare-faced Ibis, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Black-headed Ducks, Black-necked Swans, Cocoroba Swans, Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Ringed Teal, Silver Teal, Southern Screamers with chicks, Cattle Tyrant, and a Roadside Hawk. In the trees along the path, we saw Picazuro Pigeon, Checkered Woodpecker, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, White-crested Tyrannulet, Great Kiskadee, Chivi Vireo, Creamy-bellied Thrush, Black-capped Warbling Finch, Sayaca Tanager, Masked Gnatcatcher, and a Gilded Hummingbird that flitted above us briefly. In the open pond were Great Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Red-gartered Coot and a pair of Crested Caracaras perched on an island.

During a two-hour walk through the park, we tallied an impressive 45 species of birds. Some were common and would be seen almost daily throughout the rest of the trip, but many would not be seen again after leaving Buenos Aires.

Once back at the hotel we freshened up and then went to dinner back at La Josefina restaurant. After our large lunch, most of us ordered a light meal and sampled their empanadas and juices.

October 21 Trelew | Rawson Lagoon | Puerto Piramides

This morning, we flew from Buenos Aires to Trelew. We were now officially in Patagonia!

We were met by our new driver, Rubin and our local guide, Rubin; seriously, that is not a typo. From the airport we headed east toward Rawson Lagoon.

Our first stop was a very productive pond and wetland next to a narrow dirt road. There were Yellow-winged Blackbirds, Grassland Yellow-Finch, Rusty-backed Monjita and Patagonia Mockingbird. In the water were Yellow-billed Teal and Black-headed Duck and a couple of Chimango Caracaras flew through. The ticking of a Wren-like Rushbird was heard and we spent some time trying to find it. It finally gave us a brief glimpse of its reddish brown back as it flew through the marsh grasses and was gone. But a highlight of this spot was the arresting Spectacled Tyrant with its jet-black body and bright yellow eye-ring and bill. Then, as it flew away, we could see its contrasting white primaries.



Cruising slowly down the road Geri spotted a Correndera Pipit along a farm's fence-line. We then came to our destination, Rawson Lagoon, where we could see a line of pink in the distance; a thousand Chilean Flamingos! We hiked several hundred yards to get closer. There we could see hundreds of White-faced Ibis and Sanderling, Black-necked Stilts, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, and Red Shovelers.

Moving to another section of the lagoon we found a variety of waterfowl. In addition to what we had already seen there were Cinnamon Teal, Chiloe Wigeon, Red Shoveler, Silvery Grebe, Red-Gartered Coot, White-winged Coot, White-faced Ibis, and Brown-hooded Gull. We even had a close flyby of a White-tailed Kite.

On the way back to Trelew we stopped at the model of Patagotitan mayorum, the largest dinosaur yet discovered, took a group photo, and found a Carbonated Sierra Finch.

We next made an unscheduled stop for some birds on power lines near the road, Burrowing Parakeets! What a find! While we were watching the Parakeets a Chiguanco Thrush was also spotted. This would be the only sighting of these species for the trip, so this was a great find. While driving we also had our first roadside sighting of Variable Hawk.

It was an hour and a half drive to Puerto Piramides and our hotel for the next three nights, Del Nomade. We arrived after dark, so we quickly unloaded and went straight to dinner at The Paradise restaurant, just down the street.

October 22 Punta Piramides | Whale Watching Cruise | Punta Norte

We met this morning at 7:30 for breakfast at our hotel. The delicious breakfast included homemade yogurt and breads, eggs, and cheese. We then headed out to Punta Piramides. The air was clear and crisp. Driving a winding road through the massive sand dune hills we reached the point where we had a bird's eye view of a sea lion colony. There were many Kelp Gulls and striking, all white, Snowy Sheathbills. A pair of adult Dolphin Gulls huddled together near the sea lions and a Giant Petrel bobbed in the water below us. From another overlook we could see Blackish Oystercatchers, Imperial Cormorants, Royal Terns and South American Terns. As a special treat, a Southern Right Whale and calf rose and fell from the surface just meters from the sea lion colony's rock ledge, giving great views and photos.



Back at the parking area were two Southern Martins, an adult and a juvenile, perched on poles for close looks. As we headed back to town an Elegant Crested Timamou trotted down the road in front of the van.

It was then on to meet our boat for whale watching. While waiting for our departure we scanned the bay and found a Great Grebe, several Magellanic Penguins, and South American Terns that were plunge-diving for dinner.

We climbed aboard our whale watching boat and headed out into Golfo Nuevo. Once we were about half a mile offshore, we encountered a mother Right Whale with two calves that surfaced multiple times close to our boat and once within a few feet. A remarkable and exciting experience! We continued to watch the whales for about an hour and then headed in for a close pass by the Sea Lion colony. Among the many Sea Lions, a majestic bull had a brief tussle with a hapless young Sea Lion that tried to come ashore right next to the bull. With its head back, teeth bared and its thick ruff that resembled a mane it was easy to imagine how they came to be called Sea Lions.

Returning to port, and a bit hungry, we had lunch at a restaurant close to the boat launch. We then headed out for a 70 km drive to Punta Norte. There were lots of roadside Guanacos along the way along with many domestic sheep.

At Punta Norte we walked the boardwalk trails high atop the dune ridge to look down on the beach where there were about a dozen female Elephant Seals with black pups. One of the pups, lying next to its mother, was calling with an almost dog-like bark. There were also a few Sea Lions on the beach as well as American and Blackish Oystercatchers. Well down the shore were a flock of Southern Giant Petrels and a couple of Orca, which, given the distance, took us a minute to ID. In the dune shrubs were Morning Sierra Finches, Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail, Lesser Shrike-Tyrant and Tufted Tit-Tyrant.

When we returned to the parking lot we were just getting back into the van when a Large Hairy Armadillo walked over to a puddle in the parking area for a drink. Everyone was able to get great looks and lots of close-up photos.

In the road heading back to Puerto Pirmides we stopped for three Elegant Crested-Tinnamou that cooperated for lots of photos and then for a group of Guanacos, beautifully backlit by the late afternoon sun.



We next made a stop at a water hole and took a short, but productive, walk. There were White-throated Chacolate, Diuca Finch, Crested Duck and a Two-banded Plover with three chicks. We also briefly saw two Mara and a European Hare.

Back at our hotel we met at 7:30 for the checklist. Xavier said that we had already reached about 95 species of birds and eight mammals. Dinner tonight was back at The Paradise Restaurant.

October 23 Punta Cantor | Caleta Valdez

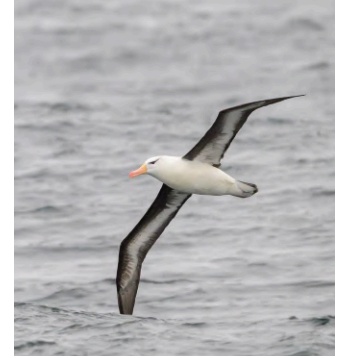
Today, we left the hotel at 8:15 am and headed southeast to the Atlantic Coast and then north along the coast road to Caleta Valdez. We made several stops along the way.

The first was for a Gray Fox that crossed the road but was curious enough to stop and watch us, allowing us to watch it. While watching the fox Long-tailed Meadowlarks landed on a fence line showing off their bright red chests.

A little further down the road Rubin spotted a Burrowing Owl perched on a roadside fence post. We stopped for great views and photos. While there, a Common Miner walked across the road and Tim spotted several Mara across a field filled with sheep. Although distant, we had a much better look than we did the day before. There was also a Cinereous Harrier, a Scale-throated Earthcreeper and a Correndera Pipit.

Just ten minutes later we came to an abrupt stop again when Tim spotted a group of Lesser Rea out in a field. They were spooked by our vehicle but remained about a hundred yards out, across a field full of sheep. Above the Rea two Cinereous Harriers swooped about. Closer to the road, a dozen Baird's Sandpipers were working the mud and several Shiney Cowbirds were hanging out with the sheep.

Another ten minutes down the road and Rubin spotted three families of Mara out in a field. We stopped and watched one of the families, two adults and two young, as they came galloping toward us, stopping about 50 yards away where the young disappeared into their burrow. It was a very cool, National Geographic, moment.



At Punta Cantor, Xavier quickly found several Mourning Sierra Finches, a Patagonia Mockingbird and a Patagonia Canastero near the parking lot. We then walked the boardwalk to the top of the dunes where we could look down on a score of Elephant Seals lounging on the beach. In addition to many females and pups there was one huge adult male and a couple of smaller, immature males. We followed the trail through the dunes to the end where we saw a dozen Imperial Cormorants on the beach and had very close looks at a Scale-throated Earthcreeper and a Grassland Yellow-finch. There was also an American Kestrel and multiple little Green Lizards along the way. We returned to the Visitors Center where we had lunch.

After lunch we continued north along the coast to Caleta Valdez and a spot where over 200 Magellanic Penguin nest burrows dot the cliff. Several burrows were but a few feet from the observation boardwalk allowing amazingly close viewing, the penguins totally ignoring their admiring public.

Continuing north we soon turned west, leaving the coast behind and finished a grand loop back to Puerto Piramides where we had a few hours to rest and explore the town before our checklist and dinner.

October 24 Isla Escondida | Punta Tombo | Ushuaia

We left Hotel Del Nomade in Puerto Piramides at 6:30am. There was a three-and-a-half-hour drive ahead of us to get to Punta Tombo. This was also the day we were to fly to Ushuaia, so we loaded all our luggage in the van and headed south. The skies were cloudy, and the temperatures were in the mid 40's, cooler than the last couple of days.

Along the way were ever-present Guanaco and the occasional Variable Hawk. After passing through Trelew we stopped at Isla Escondida. We could walk closer to Elephant Seals on this beach, although we were cautioned to stay 50 feet away. The high tide line provided a nice natural "do not cross" indicator. There were two large males and about eight females with pups of various ages. One looked like it was born recently. It seemed clear that the females and pups were the harem of one male as the other male kept a respectful distance from the group. Down the beach were a pair of White-headed Steamer Ducks and a couple of Two-banded Plovers. A couple of Great Grebes were diving out in the water.

After another thirty minutes of driving we arrived at Punta Tombo, a national park for the protection of the 250,000 Magellanic Penguins that nest there. A mile long boardwalk and trail wound past hundreds of penguins and nest burrows. In a few, a large egg could be seen under the adult. The trail ended on a rocky outcrop where



one could look back at the beach. There were several groups of penguins on the beach while a few rolled playfully in the gentle surf. There was also a pond with a pair of White-headed Steamer Ducks and two Crested Ducks. We made our way back to the van stopping to watch a Brown Skua as it flew past and a Chimango Caracara, which had a nest near the trail. There were Guanacos in every direction including a few close to the path. When we arrived back at the van Xavier had picked up lunch which we ate as we headed to the airport. There we said our farewells to the two Rubins.

In Ushuaia, the Hotel Tolkeyén was only 10 minutes from the airport. We checked in and gathered in the dining room for the checklist and dinner. With the hotel set on the banks of the Beagle Channel the birding from the windows of the dining room was quite good.

October 25 Beagle Channel Cruise | Encerrada Bay Urban Natural Reserve

After breakfast at the hotel, we met our local guide, Luciano, for a ride into town where we boarded the "Massimo" catamaran for a cruise east on the Beagle Channel. It was cloudy and about 40 degrees when we left. Our first bird was a Southern Giant Petrel off the stern of the boat. But then we saw a Southern Fulmar and an impressive Black-browed Albatross. Wow, what a start! We passed a small, rocky island covered with Imperial Cormorants. Then we approached a series of small islands and were surprised to see an Andean Condor perched on the rocks. A first for Xavier! Circling two rocky islands, one topped by a lighthouse, we could see many birds. There were hundreds of Imperial Cormorants, Kelp Gulls and Dolphin Gulls. There were bright white Kelp Geese and Snowy Sheathbills. A small, dark brown Blackish Cinclodes perched on the rocks, and sea lions and their pups sprawled about. Imperial Cormorants were displaying courtship behaviors. Our boat then continued east to "Penguin Island". Here there were both Magellanic and Gentoo Penguins. The boat beached its bow against the island giving us close and lengthy views.

Our boat now turned around for the return trip to Ushuaia. Running flat out it still took about an hour to get back to port. The winds had picked up making big swells and a very rough ride. We were thankful for the catamaran style hull which eliminated side-to-side rolling.



Back in Ushuaia it was time for lunch, and we walked from the boat launch to a delightful little restaurant named Tia Elvira. The building was old and had a lot of character and the food was excellent. Many had the delicious seafood soup and topped off the meal with a tiramisu.

It was raining when we left the restaurant, so Luciano picked us up and we headed to, Encerrada Bay Urban Natural Reserve, a pond and wetland in downtown Ushuaia which the local birding group had protected from development. The gods smiled and the rain stopped while we walked around. The pond was rich in waterfowl that was very close and easy to study in detail. We first saw a group of Flying Steamer Ducks. Then there were beautiful Red Shovelers, Crested Ducks and Upland Geese. Crossing a footbridge there was a small beaver dam and an American Beaver could be seen lounging on the far shore of the pond. Luciano walked carefully along the bank of a stream and found a Magellanic Snipe which stayed still long enough for most to get a look.

It was getting on in the day, so we made our way back to the hotel but came to a sudden stop as we passed a small field very near the hotel. Remarkably, there was a Black-faced Ibis standing on the other side of a chain link fence. It was kind enough to allow time for lots of "oohs", "aahs" and photos.

After settling in we did our checklist and had dinner at our table in the hotel dining room.

October 26 Tierra del Fuego National Park | Ushuaia Town Dump

Today was our day to explore Tierra del Fuego National Park, just 30 minutes from the hotel. Driving into the park, wild horses could be seen grazing about and, occasionally, standing in the road. We drove past the visitors' center to a dirt parking lot next to Lago Rocca. Stepping out of the van we quickly saw an Austral Thrush that looked very much like a pale American Robin. Then Xavier spotted a colorful and frenetic Thorn-tailed Rayadito. These two species would be constant companions on our walk. Snowcapped Cerro Condor shone brightly on the other side of the deep blue lake. These mountains were on the other side of the Chilean border which also cut across the near end of the lake. We walked a wooded trail in search of the Magellanic Woodpecker and any other birds we could find. The forest was dominated by three species of Nothofagus trees, known as the Southern Beech that are unrelated to the American Beech. Their bark was covered by light green, filamentous mosses and lichens, and epiphytes known as "Chinese Lanterns" hung from their branches. Shortly, Xavier found a White-crested Elaenia which gave us brief looks. We were having little luck finding the woodpecker although a single drumming sound told us it was around. Then Luciano reported that he had seen it ahead of us on the trail. We got to the spot and waited and watched and then there was a crimson flash in the forest. The

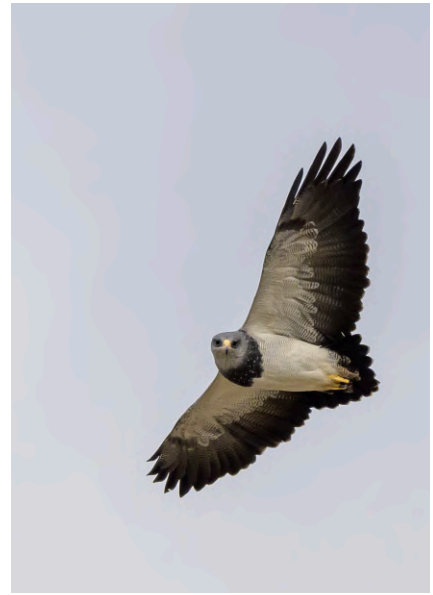


male Magellanic Woodpecker landed in a tree about 50 yards away. We all got great looks and photos and there were high-fives all around. But then a huge, all black bird flew in. It was the stunning, black female with her droopy crest and deep red feathers at the base of her bill. We were a very happy group. We returned the way we came, taking time to enjoy the forest, the occasional Rayadito, and interesting plants such as the holly-like Darwin's Bayberry. We then climbed back into the van and headed to the Visitors Center for a cappuccino and some quick shopping in the gift store.

We then drove a short distance to another dirt parking lot. Geri had spotted Ashy-headed Geese at breakfast but here there was a pair much closer by the lake edge. We entered the trail next to a sign marking the end of Route 3, the TransAmerica Highway, that told us that Alaska was a mere 17,848 km away. Our new trail took us through a wet, marshy habitat that had us dodging mud puddles. The beginning of the trail was an open shrubby area with occasional low trees. There Xavier found us Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Black-chinned Siskin and Patagonia Sierra Finch. We continued down the trail looking for the Austral Pygmy Owl. Across a lake an Andean Condor could be seen soaring against the dark green mountainside. At a small rocky peninsula, a pair of Flightless Steamer Ducks paddled about and then landed to do some preening and give us good looks. On the far side of the lake, a low, rocky island was covered with Imperial Cormorants.

We didn't find the owl so we returned to the van where a box lunch was waiting. We ate on the road to save time getting to our next birding stops back in Ushuaia. First on the agenda was the old Ushuaia airport where Xavier immediately found our target bird, the Dark-bellied Cinclodes, singing from the roof of a utility building. Check! With nothing else new there, we boarded the van and headed for the town dump, a notoriously prime birding habitat.

At the dump, hundreds of Kelp Gulls swirled around with a few Crested and Chimango Caracaras. But then Xavier found a White-throated Caracara perched on a dirt bank high above us. Then a huge dark bird with the unmistakable broad wings and labored flap of an eagle flew into view and perched on a pole. An immature Black-throated Buzzard Eagle! We were still watching the Caracara show when an adult Black-throated Buzzard Eagle was spotted high in the sky, and then another. We eventually had great looks at two adult and two juvenile Black-chested Buzzard Eagles! It was hard to tear away from the spectacle, but we drove back into town and made a stop at a local artisan market where several of us made purchases.



We got back to the hotel with time before dinner to work on packing for our travel day tomorrow.

October 27 Flight to Calafate | Drive into Chile

We left Hotel Tolkeyén at 9:15 am for the short ride to the airport. Our one-hour flight to Calafate left at 11:30 am. After retrieving our luggage we met our new driver and stowed our belongings in the van for safe keeping while we had lunch at a remarkably good restaurant within the airport. After lunch we started out on a three-hour drive into Chile and to our new hotel. This was big sky country! This glacially formed prairie stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. The soil was densely covered by plants but none more than 18-24 inches tall. With nothing to impede its progress the wind whipped across the road causing our van to sway constantly from side to side. Occasionally, there would be a small group of Guanacos. There was a monotonous beauty to the place.

Around 6:00pm we made it to the border and Chilean Immigration. It was then only a few minutes to Cerro Castillo and the Hotel Estancia El Ovejero Patagónico. The hotel had a sheep-farming, cowboy theme with lots of wood, leather and sheepskins. We met in the hotel's restaurant for our checklist and dinner. The unassuming menu belied the excellent food we were served.

October 28 Laguna Amarga Ranch (Pumas!) | Bahia Bote

We left the hotel in the dark at 5:00 am this morning to meet our lion trackers, Diego and Juan Pablo. Leaving the relative comfort of our van we transferred into two four-wheel drive trucks capable of traversing the steppe on the Laguna Amarga Ranch. After about 30 minutes we drove up on a bluff and stopped. We stepped out of the trucks with the snowy peak of Almirante Nieto glowing behind us. Gale force winds were buffeting us but on the opposite slope was a dead Guanaco and near it one could just make out the face of a puma peering from behind a low bush. Our guides said this was a dominant male protecting its kill. Working hard to stay upright and hold a camera steady against the 40 mile-per-hour wind we took a few photos and climbed back into the trucks to set out in search of more Pumas.

After nearly an hour of searching there was a call on the radio that another cat had been found. We hurried to the location and our group headed up-slope on foot. Hiking against the wind had its challenges and we needed to move about 500 yards to get to where we could see the puma. Once there we could see the regal female, recumbent on the opposite slope. We sat down to avoid being blown down the hill and watched her for 20



minutes before making our way slowly back to the vehicles. We immediately drove to a new location where another female puma was lying at the base of a bush. She was not at all disturbed by our presence and we were able to approach to within 50 yards. After watching her for a while and getting lots of photos, we had breakfast at the trucks. We then spent another hour exploring the Laguna Amarga Ranch, looking for more pumas and enjoying the spectacular scenery. Along the way we added Spot-bellied Ground Tyrant and Grey-bellied Shrike Tyrant to the list.

We returned to the hotel for a break and lunch and then went out at 3:15 pm to drive around the Bahia Bote area. This was a very productive birding outing through a sub-arctic forest habitat. We first came across three Andean Condors, two adults and a juvenile, in a field. Next to them was a smaller bird which turned out to be a juvenile Black-chested Buzzard Eagle. It was a testament to the size of the condors that they dwarfed the eagle. At a small, roadside pond we had Red-gartered Coot and a stunning Silver Teal. There were also Chilean Swallows, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Austral Negrito and Black-chinned Siskin. Turning up a road with more trees we saw several passerines including Austral Blackbird, White-crested Elaenia, Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Grey-hooded Sierra Finch, a fledgling Austral Thrush, and a White-throated Tree Runner. On the way back to the hotel we saw Southern Lapwings, American Oystercatchers and a beautiful, male American Kestrel.

October 29 Bahia Bote | Laguna Azul | Rio Serrano

There was steady rain and wind as we loaded ourselves into the van this morning. We would first repeat the productive path through Bahia Bote that we did yesterday afternoon. At roadside ponds there were Silvery Grebes, Black-necked Swans, Black-faced Ibises, Red-garters Coots, and a pair of striking Spectacled Ducks.

We came to an abrupt stop as a Malina's Hog-nosed Skunk crossed in front of the van. Then Xavier pointed out that it was carrying its kit. Enchanted, we watched as she ran along the edge of the road next to the van and then disappeared into a den.

Further down the road a pair of Long-tailed Meadowlarks were singing a duet from a shrub next to the road, the soaking wet male's crimson breast standing out like a beacon.

In a grassy pond we scored another new bird, a beautiful pair of Yellow-billed Teal. Three Andean Condors on a slope in a field to our left gave us some of the best looks to date.



We returned to Cerro Castillo and stopped at the local gift shop to get a warm drink and browse for remembrances to take home. It was then back to the hotel for lunch and to finish packing for our transfer to a new hotel.

Ricardo, our driver for the next few days, loaded the luggage into the van. This afternoon we had a 75 km drive to Hotel del Paine on the Serrano River.

After we had been driving for about a half hour Geri spotted a Lesser Rhea close to the road. We stopped and got out for photos, braving the bitter wind and expecting it to bolt away immediately, as all others had. But it didn't, and we were able to get great looks and many, frame filling, photos.

We then made a stop at Laguna Azul or Blue Lake and went for a walk. There were Crested Ducks, Magellanic Oystercatchers, and White-tufted Grebes at the lake. The bird of the stop was the Rufous-tailed Plantcutter and there were also White-crested Elaenia and Fire-eyed Diucon.

After leaving Laguna Azul we came across a wetland where there were hundreds of Chilean Swallows, presumably feeding on an insect hatch. We watched the spectacle for a bit and moved on.

A few more miles down the road Xavier abruptly called for Ricardo to stop. He had seen something a hundred yards away. A tawny brown spot against the green hillside which turned out to be a mother Puma and her, quite large, kitten. We watched them for 20 minutes as they lay on the hill, wrestling occasionally, paws flying. What a delight!

Though misty, rainy and deeply overcast we stopped to take in our first close view of the magnificent Cerro Paine.

Following a winding road down a mountainside into the valley of the Rio Serrano we finally arrived at the Hotel del Paine.



October 30 Torres del Paine | Misceláneo Trail | Punte Weber | Grey Glacier

In the morning the view of the Torres del Paine mountains across the Rio Serrano from our hotel was spectacular, despite intermittent rain. A persistent rainbow stretched across the sky framing Cerro Donoso to our west. There were Southern Lapwings and a Gray-flanked Cinclodes seen at the hotel after breakfast.

Leaving the hotel, the road rose steeply to an overlook. With our hotel several hundred feet below and a spectacular view of the valley and Cerro Paine we took a group photo with the Torres del Paine in the background.

Our first stop was to take a walk at Misceláneo Trail. We walked up a slope to overlook Lago Toro. The birds were very active here with great looks at some old friends; Spiny-tailed Ryiodito, Fire-eyed Duicon, Austral Thrush and White-crested Elaenia. Not new but wonderful, close views in good light.

We made a brief stop at Punte Weber where we picked up an Ochre-naped Ground Tyrant running along the gravel at the lake edge. Another stop gave us better looks at Ashy-headed Goose and Chiloe Wigeon.

At 11:30 we arrived at the visitors center for the Grey Glacier. We set off on the trail and crossed a foot bridge that had a wind warning sign. That was a first! Fortunately, it was green today meaning it was safe to cross. We started up the trail and Xavier picked up on the call of the Austral Parakeet. Soon three, very loud, birds came into the tree above us giving us great, lengthy views.

To see the glacier, it was necessary to walk downhill and across an expanse of gray, sandy sediment at the outflow of Gray Lake. That would not be so challenging, but the 40-50 mile per hour wind whipping, unimpeded, down the canyon was challenging. Ultimately, two members of our group decided to cross to look up Lake Gray to the glacier, walking sideways against the wind for over half a mile. The wiser members of our group turned back for the protection of the trees. When everyone was back together after the glacier hike, we went to the Visitor Center's excellent cafeteria for lunch. "Excellent cafeteria" may seem to be an oxymoron, but not in this case, the food was remarkably good.



Our first stop after lunch was next to a bridge at the north end of Lago el Toro where Xavier found a Great Grebe! Beautiful bird! We then continued, northeast, following the base of the Torres del Paine. Every turn had a view more spectacular than the last. The area was dotted with ponds and we made stops at several to search for birds. We found White-tufted Grebe, Wren-like Rushbird, Yellow-billed Teal, and Black-necked Swan.

In the late afternoon we took a walk at the north end of Lago el Toro in an area of Magellanic sub-alpine forest. We first found an Austral Thrush carrying a beak-full of worms and there were a number of our regulars: Fire-eyed Diucon, Thorn-tailed Rayadito, White-crested Elaenia and Black-chinned Siskin. But then the Austral Pygmy Owl came in and landed in a low tree at eye level. We were able to watch the owl for ten minutes as it moved from perch to perch. We had a very happy and excited group! With that great topper for the day we returned to the Hotel del Paine for dinner.

October 31 Estancia Vega Castillo | Laguna Sophia | Puerto Natales

We woke today to a crystal-clear morning, the rising sun lighting the Torres del Paine beautifully. After breakfast we packed our luggage in the van and headed south, following the western shore of Lago el Toro and then turning north, back to Bahia el Bote. At 10:00 am we passed through the gate of Estancia Vega Castillo, a private ranch maintained for birdwatching and research. We drove about a kilometer within the ranch until the van could go no further and then walked to a rise where a huge wetland, teeming with waterfowl, stretched out before us. We were all super excited when our nemesis bird for the last few days, the Chilean Flicker, called and flew into view.

We hiked down the hill to the edge of the wetland to watch the show. The skies were clear, and the sun was at our backs, providing beautiful illumination on the birds. There were several hundred Brown-hooded Gulls swirling about the far side. One of three pair of Black-necked Swans paddled close by, their necks synchronously rising and falling in pair bonding displays while four cygnets rode comfortably on their mother's back. A pair of Crested Ducks were followed by a train of six ducklings. Four stubby little Andean Ducks floated around with their heads tucked and their short black tails cocked up and pairs of stunning Red Shovelers paddled by. Black-faced Ibis flew past overhead and a Cinerous Harrier cruised the ridge above us. We spent two hours in this magical place and it was hard to tear away.



From there we drove about 30 minutes to the restaurant and gift shop at Cerro Castillo for lunch and then began our journey south to Puerto Natales.

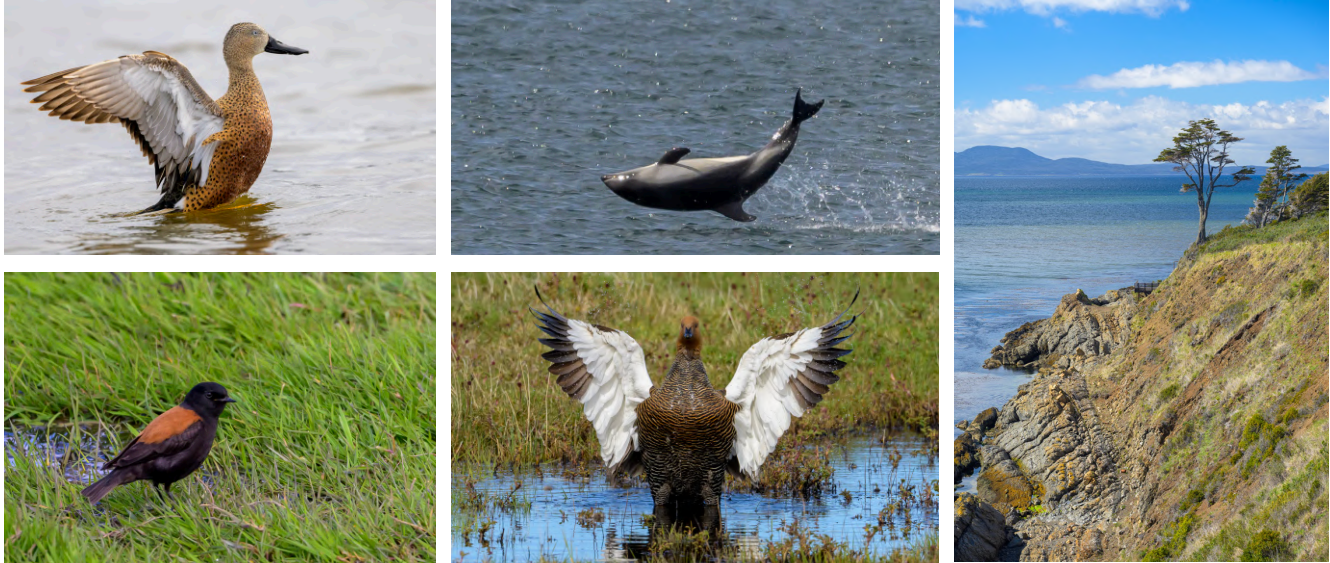
We made a stop at Laguna Sophia, a campground covered with dandelions where we did a short walk but did not find any new birds. A short time later we arrived at our hotel, Casa Patagonia, in Puerto Natales. It was only 4 o'clock so we had some time to explore the town before meeting for our checklist at 6:30pm. We then went right across the street to El Bote restaurant for an outstanding meal.

November 1 Puerto Natales | Estancia Olga Theresa (Condors!) | Punta Arenas

Breakfast was at 7:30 in the hotel and then we were out the door to go birding around the steppe north of town. It was a gray morning with temperatures in the mid 40's but no rain. We made several stops to walk along the gravel roads walking, looking and listening. Our first sighting was a Long-tailed Meadowlark perched on the fence of a small airport. Then, across the road, Tim spotted a Gray Fox trotting through the brush, occasionally stopping to check us out. The regular Australs were always with us; Negrito, Thrush and Blackbird, and there was a pair of Chiloe Wigeon. At our next stop there were two sub-adult Black-chested Buzzard Eagles perched on power poles. They seemed indifferent to our presence but not to the Chimango Caracaras and Southern Lapwings that eventually harassed them into leaving. In a small pond were two pairs of Coscoroba Swans. At Puerto Prat we added a new species, Blue and White Swallow, while in the fjord below us there were seven pair of Black-necked Swans, some with cygnets in tow. At another location we added a Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail to the list.

It was time to return to Puerto Natales for lunch. We had a truly delicious meal at Restaurant Nandu and some of us picked up items in the attached gift shop.

Our next destination was Estancia Olga Theresa where there is an Andean Condor roost in the cliff above the ranch. It was raining steadily when we arrived, and it was unclear whether we would be able to see the condors given the weather conditions. After a warming cup of coffee, and information on the history of the ranch from the owner, we headed to the observation site. Amazingly, the rain stopped long enough for us to walk the 700 yards to the observation point and watch the condors. We counted about 25 tucked into crevices on the cliff face in their "condor-minium" (thanks for that, Xavier) when we arrived. With the rain paused, condors started flying in and taking up positions in the roost. The rain started again after we had been there 20 minutes but, in that time, another 25 condors had flown in. It was an amazing spectacle to see. With the rain coming down we hurried back to our van, a little wet but exhilarated by the experience.



We arrived at the Hotel Diego de Almagro in Punta Arenas about an hour later.

November 2 Punta Arenas | Fort Bulnes | Three Bridges Wetland

We left our hotel in Punta Arenas this morning at 8:15 am. It was blindingly sunny with temperatures in the mid 40's, although it felt colder with the wind chill. We headed south along Route 9 as it hugged the coast of the Strait of Magellan. The city is a busy port and fishing is a major component of the economy as evidenced by the large number of small fishing boats along the coast.

Our first stop was a small inlet where there were several beached fishing boats. A pair of South American Terns were fishing in the small channel. There were Crested Ducks and Chiloe Wigeons, and a Black Browed Albatross was flying about out in the Strait. A pair of American Oystercatchers walked on the gravel dune, silhouetted by the reflections of the rising sun on the water. On the other side of Route 9 we found a young Black-chested Buzzard Eagle perched close to the road.

A little later Gerry spotted some Dusky Dolphins as we were driving. We then pulled over at a spot where there were Ashy-headed Geese closer than we had seen before. A pair of Southern Lapwings complained loudly, so we surmised that they must have had a nest nearby.

Around another corner Xavier spotted our target bird for the day, Ruddy-headed Goose. There were a pair, and we were able to watch and photograph them for a while.

We then visited Fort Bulnes, a Chilean Fort established in 1843 to protect the Strait of Magellan. We explored the restored wooden structures and the trails through Nothofagus (Southern Beech) forest. A surprise bird was a Dark-bellied Cinclodes perched on one of the fort structures. At an overlook we could see Black-browed Albatrosses flying low over the waters of the Strait, their wingtips seeming to brush the water as they turned. There were also Southern Giant Petrels, and Southern Fulmars.

We drove back to the park visitors center where we had lunch looking out over the Strait, shopped in the gift shop and strolled through the museum. In a hallway were scale models of the ships important to the history of the area including Ferdinand Magellan's "Trinidad", Sir Francis Drake's "Golden Hind" and Charles Darwin's "Beagle".



We next visited the algae covered, rocky shore and harbor of Puerto de Hambre and learned the history of the 1584 failed Spanish colony there.

Driving north on Route 9 we saw a pod of Dusky Dolphin playing in the wake of a tour boat. We watched for about 10 minutes as the dolphin surfaced and breached, some flying out of the water. Several had white bellies indicating that they were young.

Back in the city Xavier took us to the Three Bridges Wetland. This large marsh in an industrial area was rich with waterfowl. Very close to the walkway were an Upland Goose on a nest and a Red-gartered Coot on a nest. There were Chiloe Wigeon, Yellow-billed Pintails, Red Shovelers, Crested Ducks, Flightless Steamer Ducks, and a White-tufted Grebe. Further out were Black-necked Swans and Coscoroba Swans. There was a Southern Lapwing with an adorable little, precocious chick. In fact, several of the species seen were either on nests or had chicks. We then moved to the other side of the wetland where there were three Chimango Caracaras perched on a fence, and a very close pair of Red Shovelers. This was a terrific capstone walk for our trip.

Back at the hotel we did our final checklist and had our farewell dinner. The trip tally was 152 species of birds, 14 mammals, two reptiles and, thanks to Gerry and Vicky, six butterflies. As is always true on these trips, a group of strangers met two weeks prior and parted good friends.

Photos by Hugh Simmons: Group Photo, Austral Parakeet, Southern Lapwing, Puma, Magellanic Woodpecker, Magellanic Penguin, Rufous-bellied Thrush, Black-capped Warbling Finch, Monk Parakeet, Spectacled Tyrant, White-faced Ibis, Group Rawson Lagoon, Kelp Gull, Southern Right Whale, South American Sea Lion, Mourning Sierra Finch, Punta Piramides, Guanaco, Gray Fox, Burrowing Owl, Chimango Caracara, Patagonia Mockingbird, Black-browed Albatross, Southern Fulmar, Magellanic Cormorant, Imperial Cormorant, Dolphin Gull, Group, Kelp Goose, Gentoo Penguin, Black-feaced Ibis, Tolkeyen Hotel View, Upland Goose, Group Tierra del Fuego, Tufted Tit, Magellanic Woodpecker, Ushuaia, Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, Red-gartered Coot, Silver Teal, White-throated Treerunner, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Group at Laguna Azul, Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk, Lesser Rhea, Torres del Paine, Thorn-tailed Rayadito, Austral Pygmy Owl, Scenic, Chilean Swallow, Black-necked Swan, Andean Condor Roost, Rio Agua Fresca, South American Tern, Red Shoveler, Austral Negrito, Fuerte Bulnes, Dusky Dolphin, Upland Goose, Puerto de Hambre, Chimango Caracara