

Chile Trip Report

27 February to 12 March 2011 (excluding the travel dates)

Another trip without Peter but this time he would have liked to have come but did not have the available holiday and I had some that I needed to use up. Chile is a long, long way to go (especially getting back when we started travelling at 9 am on Saturday morning and did not get to Heathrow until almost 7 pm Sunday evening) but the scenery is incredible, the people are really friendly (although they do not speak much English even in the four star hotels) and the food was excellent. I do not need to mention the wine, as I am a great lover of Chilean red wine anyway. At a number of meals a glass of wine was included with the food. One glass was not enough so funds were spent on wine. Despite, or perhaps because of, this, I had a wonderful time.

Gerald Broddez had put together the trip. I knew some of the other travellers, having been on holiday with them before, but I met 5 new fellow travellers all of whom were extremely good company. We all had the same interests in nature, food and wine and the two weeks disappeared just like that.

We started off by flying to Santiago via Madrid, flying on Saturday night. Unfortunately we flew out of London just as the England v France rugby match was starting but we had been able to watch the second half of Italy v Wales in a bar in terminal 3. In Madrid airport we found a lovely tapas bar and started to enjoy the red wine before the 15 hour flight to Santiago. Santiago was warm and sunny and there were wonderful views of the Andes as we flew in. We did not stay in Santiago but instead drove down to the coast (which is not that far as Chile is so narrow) to a beach where we had a picnic lunch. Unfortunately by now the sun had disappeared and the warmth had gone but our spirits remained high despite the next birding spot which was an area of lakes and marsh adjacent to a sulphur factory. A typical birding spot really. However we saw lots of good water birds and a couple of Coypu (similar to a beaver) and then drove on to another beach where we found some penguins (including a new species for me the Humboldt penguin), Peruvian Pelicans (which are enormous) and a marine otter which treated us by climbing out onto a rock in order to eat its catch. I should add at this stage I am hoping to complete my penguin list at the end of this year when Peter and I go to New Zealand and the Sub-Antarctic Islands (as Peter observes frequently, there is very little difference between train spotters and bird spotters).

Anyway the next day we had a very early start in order to get to La Campana National Park which has some very special habitat and therefore some endemic birds. As it is not on the coast it gets very hot there. However we got there so early it was still foggy. That quickly burnt off but it did mean that the birds were active for quite a long time and we saw lots of species including some of those in which Peter would not be interested as they lurk under bushes and do not want to come out. We also had a brief glimpse of a Culpeo Fox running off (more about these foxes later in this report). At the end of our walk we went up to a viewpoint in the hope of getting a view of the Giant Hummingbird which could be heard occasionally but did not want to appear. We sat by some stunning cactus that have bright red flowers. We were treated to a Green-Backed Firecrown (a hummingbird) feeding there but no Giant. Some raptors were around but no Condors (in fact seen many times on the trip but not on that particular day). We went back to the park entrance to have our picnic lunch and I then started exploring around there. A mammal poked its head out of a hole in a dry stone wall so I sat on the wall in the hope it might do so again. It did and I managed to get a real close-up of it. The others in the group were told about it and everyone managed to get a good photo of the head of this Degu (it is a bit like a guinea pig). It was very sweet but did not want to come very far out so we left it in peace and then drove to

the other side of the park. This has to be reached by main roads and was well over an hour's drive away. By this time it was very hot and the walk in the afternoon was hard as it was 3.5 km with quite a lot of uphill as well. We paused in the shelter of the trees on the climb up. With the heat, there was not much wildlife around and certainly no signs of Giant Hummingbirds. We had hoped there might be a Rufous-Legged Owl or some bats (in a old mine entrance) at the top but unfortunately not. However there was a highlight on the way down. Crossing the track was a Tarantula, not a black one but a very beautiful pink and brown one. It also photographed beautifully. We then came across a large flock of California Quail (an introduced species but there are apparently more of them now in Chile than California) crossing our path. Some paused on a rock in order to be photographed. The light was not brilliant but we all had good views of them as they made their way uphill.

On the drive back to the hotel we were diverted through the main resort as the main road which bypasses it was closed. It delayed us quite substantially but meant we were able to stop by an island where we had the treat of Inca Terns (definitely high up on my wish list for the trip). We also found more Humboldt Penguins, Peruvian Boobies, Oystercatchers and, for me, a much better view of Surfbird than I had had in Alaska when it had been about 500 metres away. It is quite astonishing the distances some birds (especially waders) fly. The light was going by the time we stopped but we were able to take some photos. Dinner was therefore very late that night (about 9.20) with another early start the next day. It was a sign of how the rest of the holiday was going to be – no rest!

The following day we had to drive up through Santiago (where we would be staying that night) to a valley called El Yeso. We had a target species of bird to see called a Diademed Sandpiper-Plover. It is a very beautiful bird but, unfortunately, my photos do not do it justice. For a good photo go to <http://www.surfbirds.com/mb/media/diademed-plover-0408.jpg>

However we not only got two of these birds (this is the lowest place in the Andes where they nest) but Mike got his Condors. We had loads of them (at least 10) plus Black-Chested Buzzard Eagle and they kept flying along the cliff often two flying in formation. It was amazing. There were other birds there and Peter, had he been there, would have said he was not looking at the Ground-Tyrants as there were four species up there all of which looked pretty similar to each other and all of which would not stand still for any length of time. Just as Gerald suggested we should be returning to the bus, a White-Sided Hillstar (another hummingbird) turned up and hovered around the water presumably collecting small insects.

What I have not mentioned are the views. They were stunning. Unfortunately my wide-angled lens was sitting in the suitcase so my photos do not do the area justice. In the distance there were snow topped mountains but around us were hillsides of shale of varying hues of purple, pink and grey. There was also a lake in the distance which was a beautiful azure blue. Peter would have loved that place and I am sure been happy sitting there admiring the area whilst we tried to identify the tyrants!. What I had not realised was just how far we had travelled up and a lot of it on a gravelled, very dusty road. Going down we realised just how far up we had gone, and, as I was sitting in the back of the bus, I felt quite dizzy by the end of it due to the number of bends we swung around.

One night in Santiago and then a very early start for a flight down to Puerto Montt which is about two-thirds of the way down Chile. This was so that we could then take the ferry across the sea to Chiloe Island which is known for some endemic (or nearly endemic) mammals and also for Blue Whales spending the season in the channel between Chiloe and the mainland.

During our stay on the island we enjoyed three boat trips (as well as the ferry to and from the island which was brilliant for the seabirds, swans, cormorants, sealions and dolphins we saw whilst on it). The first was going to be on our first afternoon on Chiloe. Chiloe is where we discovered that all the roads, apart from the main road running north to south, are gravelled and therefore quite hard work to be on. This was after we had lunched beside a flock of black-necked swans. These are the most beautiful of swans and they did not seem to be disturbed by us whilst we had our picnic. There were also some quite tame Southern Lapwings and American Oystercatchers nearby. We then checked in at our hotel (the most amazing English mustard colour paint on the outside but with beautiful sea views) and then went to the boat. We had about half an hour to wait when we got there so enjoyed a cup of tea/coffee before standing on the platform which was then rolled into the sea alongside the boat. We got onto the boat from the platform and the boat was then pushed out by the two men who took us around the islands. The sun was shining and we saw two species of Penguin, Steamer Ducks, and Kelp Geese plus different species of Cormorants and Oystercatcher. However the highlight was right at the end when a marine otter was seen. It was not disturbed by us and continued fishing around us allowing us to get some good photos. Then back to the hotel for a welcome shower and delicious meal. The hotel had a superb sea view and looked west so we had sunshine through until sunset with the excellent red wine keeping us going.

The following day was another early start as we were doing a river boat trip this time in search of the Southern River Otter which is an endangered species. The boat was not going to be able to take all of the group in one go and so Gerald drew lots. I was one of the fortunate ones to go on the morning trip. It was very misty and for the first half hour you could not see the banks of the river. However the sun gradually burnt through making for some magical moments with sun and mist and we then had a really good view of a Striped Backed Bittern which is a really difficult bird to see so that was a real bonus. We then got to a lake and there were lots of water birds plus some small passerines and we had really good views of a couple of them including the Many Coloured Rush Tyrant which is bright yellow (mainly) but a multi-coloured bird. Then best of all, around the corner, a mother otter and a cub. They were sitting on a patch of grass and remained there for about a minute. Then they went into the water, the cub started swimming towards us and Mum therefore started calling it back. Magical, magical moments. They then disappeared and we did not see them again. We then went further up the river and got some lovely views of the two species of Caracara sitting in a tree together so you could compare the size. On the ground below were four black vultures looking as badly behaved as the ones we have seen at the Hawk Conservancy Trust when we have visited there. Another brief glimpse of an otter and then we made our way back. The sun shone all the time and, as we started to get back towards where we started, we had a Great Grebe still in breeding plumage glide past us giving superb reflections as the wind had still not got up. To cap it all, there was a Ringed Kingfisher sitting on a post and not flying off as we got close.

After such a fantastic morning the afternoon was hard work with a walk in a forest with quite steep slopes and all the birds hiding. However the highlight was getting to the wood. It was on a miniature railway with a tractor pushing us. It was driven by Vanessa's mother (Vanessa being our guide for the afternoon). Both Vanessa and her mother were absolutely charming but they spoke very little English which made it very challenging as Duncan (apart from Gerald) was the only Spanish speaker amongst the group and he was on the afternoon boat trip. Still we managed and eventually got to see the two species we wanted to spot. However the photographs were a dismal failure due to the lack of light. Both species were very blurred. By this time the river trip had finished and they had also seen river otter so everyone was happy. We were all so lucky with the weather because it had been yet another day of sunshine.

Another early start in order to get to the Tepuheico Park. There are four species of very rare mammal there and we were hoping to see at least two of them, Darwin's Fox and Southern Pudu (a type of deer). Once we got to the National Park we were on a gravel track again. The track had signs warning us of a bridge being closed and of weight restrictions. Anyway we came across the bridge and it was pretty rickety so we all got out in order to reduce the weight on the bus (I think perhaps the optics should have come as well as they do weigh quite a lot). Then Gerald said he thought it was "not far now". Half an hour later and, after the bus had hit the ground a few times with its back section and getting out for another bridge, we arrived there. A beautiful lodge overlooking a lake with a veranda on the first floor with great views all around. There were red hot pokers nearby which the hummingbirds loved so, within a few minutes, we were out there trying to get a good photograph of one displaying its orange head (which is not visible most of the time: it is only when it is being aggressive to another male that it is displayed). A short time later the owner appeared and we were told we were going for a short walk before lunch. We discovered that the owner believes in walks, not ambles, looking for birds and it was an hour long route march with a couple of stops (but only one of them allowed by the owner, which was by a beautiful waterfall). The other stop we imposed as a Chucao Tapaculo was displaying to us so we managed to get some good photos. This was the bird I had failed to photograph the previous afternoon during the trip led by Vanessa. It has the most incredible loud call saying its name and is red, blue and striped with a sticking up tail and looking a bit like a robin. Most of the time it skulks but occasionally it comes out and gives a really good view of itself. It had apparently given a good view of itself the previous day to the morning walk around the wood ("you're tripping over them") much to our annoyance during the afternoon when we struggled to find one.

A delicious lunch with wine and then we thought it was siesta time but, no, the owner was taking us out on a boat trip (again split into two groups). Nothing was seen on the boat trip but it was refreshing being on the water with a cool breeze as it was very hot on land by the lodge. Then a break for about an hour and then we were off for our evening bird and mammal hunting walk. Duncan said he was going to stay at the lodge and photograph hummingbirds. Duncan had a very successful evening. We had a 3½ hour walk and saw very little – particularly none of the mammals we had come especially to see.

When we got back Duncan told us he had seen something which he had originally thought was a puppy so, after "acknowledging" it, not by stroking just by looking at it, he had turned around and continued photographing the hummingbirds. Then he suddenly thought "bloody hell I suppose it is a puppy I have not seen any dogs around here" and he decided he had better look at it more closely. Yes you have guessed it he was having brilliant views of this rare fox whilst we were tramping around seeing nothing. By the time Duncan had realised what he was seeing the fox was trotting off, he whistled and the fox stopped and looked at him and then, fortunately for Duncan, he took some photos of it. Duncan has kindly given me a copy to put on the website so that you can understand why he thought it was a puppy. Anyway Duncan never lived this story down because, a few days later, we saw a Culpeo Fox in Torres del Paine NP and again, he referred to it as a dog. I was with him this time so able to correct him but I do have to admit that the Culpeo fox does look a bit like an Alsatian and the foxes were very tame meaning we could get some brilliant photos of them.

Anyway back to Darwin's Fox. After our 3½ hour walk we had our evening meal and then went out for a 2 hour drive which was successful in that we found three very rare Pudu, in three separate sightings. Bed at 2315 and up at 5.30 when, just before our breakfast, the Darwin's Fox appeared again so we all got to see it albeit in the dark.

We then were off to Cellon for a boat trip in the hope of seeing whales. Unfortunately we were not successful but we had brilliant views of other wildlife including a sea otter eating its catch within about 5 feet of the boat. As Steve said later that day, he is not sure he wants to look at the photos he took as they are somewhat gruesome. However, we also had Chilean Dolphins which are quite rare as well as an Albatross and some more penguins. Fortunately the sun shone all day as the boat would not have been suitable in either wet or windy weather. By the end of the day everyone had glowing red faces.

Our challenge after the boat trip was the hotel. We all had a sea view but from the third floor with no lift and we were only staying one night. By helping each other we did manage to get the cases upstairs and we then enjoyed a glass of chilled wine whilst sitting on the balcony discussing what a fantastic day it had been (despite no whales) with the weather, scenery and wildlife sightings. The scenery had been brilliant as the Andes rise up on the opposite side of the channel to the one we were on hence views of the snow-topped mountains with Sooty Shearwaters soaring in front of them.

The next day we were off to the southern part of Chile and we flew down to Punta Arenas. Most of the day was taken up with the travelling as we had to go back up to Puerto Montt in order to catch the plane to Punta Arenas. It was also windy so a short walk on the seafront, after looking at a lot of new species (to the others on the trip) at some pools outside the town, was all we managed to achieve that day. We were dressed for travelling by plane not for birdwatching in almost gale conditions. However, it was quite nice to get in early for once and be able to relax!

The next day we went off to a penguin colony and had a lovely walk. On the way we discovered some Rhea and we then had Condors flying over our heads. An Aplomado Falcon was also seen and then lots of Penguins who were habituated to people so were happy to sit there whilst we took photos. As well as seeing the Penguins by their burrows, there were some on the beach so they could be watched paddling in from the sea. I was lucky enough to see a Giant Petrel fly by but it was again very windy. A few small brown birds (as Peter would say) were inland and gave some good photo opportunities. We were fortunate that day as there was a café at the colony so we took the rare opportunity of being able to have coffee or hot chocolate before a lengthy drive to our lunch spot.

In the afternoon a drive to search for skunk was successful just before we were about to turn around and go back to the hotel. The scenery there was amazing. Just as we were about to get in the bus to drive back, some Chilean Dolphins appeared to cheer us up even more with some breaching and tail-slapping. Duncan also found a Ringed Kingfisher tucked underneath the cliff and I enjoyed a walk along the beach which was made beautiful by all the washed up bleached trees and branches lying on it.

The next 3 days were spent up in the Torres de Paine National Park which is named after the main mountain. The scenery is unbelievable. We had gone there to search for Puma which live there partly due to the good supply of hares, rabbits and guanaco. Sad fact but true. Anyway we had lots of early mornings and late nights and managed to see one but a long way off. Still we had fantastic views of other mammals including Culpeo Fox (mistaken by Duncan for dog), the Grey Fox (which is only about 1/3 the size of the Culpeo Fox) and Guanaco. There were also lots of Condors around and some other good birds including Southern Lapwing and Black-necked Ibis feeding on the hotel lawns. It was a lovely place to stay as the hotel rooms were tucked underneath the mountain. In fact everywhere but the two modern 4 star hotels in Santiago and Punta Arenas were lovely. On our drives looking for wildlife there were lots of stops in order to take photos of both the scenery and wildlife and a few lessons in how to use the cameras and/or framing the photos were also given (very useful to Duncan and me). I seemingly have impressed Peter with some of the

photos I have taken as they are not all birds, mammals and plants (usually my fare when I am with him)

On our drive back to Punta Arenas we came across large flocks of geese which kept flying up in front of the mountains providing wonderful scenic shots. We got back to the town in time to have a walk along the sea front where all the talk seemed to be of the forthcoming tsunami. Fortunately for us it did not get as far as Punta Arenas and did not affect the flights home but our happiness at having had such a fantastic time was certainly tempered by the news coming from Japan. I am also really sorry Peter had not come as Chile is a brilliant place to visit. Still I have not yet seen the north of the country so perhaps the remaining pesos can be spent in that area with Peter there as well!

A big thank you to Gerald for putting together the trip and my fellow travellers for being such good company.

Penny Williams