

Trip Report

TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

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PUMAS OF PATAGONIA

Wildlife photographer and conservationist Bjorn Olesen travels to Southern Chile in search of one of the world's most beautiful and elusive cats



Torres del Paine National Park

Torres del Paine National Park, in Chile's Patagonia region, is known for its diversity of habitats - mountains, glaciers, deciduous Magellanic forests and grassy plains that shelter rare wildlife. The park, A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, has been praised by visitors as one of the most scenic and majestic wild places on the planet.



Puma *Puma concolor*

The Puma has many names such as mountain lion and cougar. This species has the largest geographic range of any terrestrial mammal in the Western hemisphere, from Canada through the USA, Central and South America down to Chile.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY BJORN OLESEN

The Puma *Puma concolor* has many names, such as mountain lion and cougar. This magnificent feline species has the largest geographic range of any terrestrial mammal in the Western hemisphere, from Canada through the USA, Central and South America down to Chile. Yet, the puma is barely ever seen throughout its entire range – with one exception: Torres del Paine National Park, not far from the southern tip of the continent. Torres del Paine National Park, in Chile's Patagonia region, is known for its great diversity of habitats from distinctive mountains, glaciers, deciduous Magellanic forests and grassy plains that shelter rare wildlife. The park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, has often been praised by visitors as one of the most scenic and majestic wild places on the planet. So why is it possible to watch the notoriously elusive pumas here, and not anywhere else in North or South America? The short answer is conservation. The sparsely populated 1,800 sqkm National Park, and the adjacent private Laguna Amarga Ranch, give them a unique safe haven. A population of around 3,000

Guanacos in the area provides a high prey density, which has supported some of the highest concentration of pumas found anywhere in the wild. Many ranchers around Torres del Paine have a negative perception of pumas killing their livestock. Despite being protected by law, pumas are still hated and hunted by ranchers. However, attitudes have started to change now, when locals realise that pumas have a tourist value. The owners of the extensive Laguna Amarga Ranch have converted their business from livestock husbandry to puma watching covering a remote area of 70 sqkm on the eastern edge of the Park. To these ranchers, a live puma is more valuable than a dead one. Several tour companies are now arranging puma tracking expeditions for photographers and nature lovers in the summer months from January to April. Over time, it is expected that more ranchers with properties adjacent to Torres del Paine will realise that ecotourism can be more profitable than sheep farming. Important that the current sustainable practices are followed, in other words only authorized guides are used,

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Puma *Puma concolor*

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Puma *Puma concolor*

A young puma with an old guanaco kill in the background. Many ranchers around Torres del Paine have a negative perception of pumas killing their livestock. Despite being protected by law, pumas are still hated and hunted by ranchers. However, attitudes have started to change now, when locals realise that pumas have a tourist value.



Puma *Puma concolor*

The sparsely populated 1,800 km² Torres del Paine National Park, and the adjacent private Laguna Amarga Ranch, give pumas a unique safe haven. A population of around 3,000 Guanacos in the area provides a high prey density.

puma tracking off road is only permitted outside the Park, and no baiting, chasing or interfering with the pumas is allowed. Pumas are independent and cautious by nature, and finding one in the wild without the help of a professional guide is almost impossible. It is a good sign that the number of pumas in the Park is increasing. The guides know how to read the pumas and to stay at a secure distance for the safety of their clients; fortunately puma attacks on humans are very rare. In and around Torres del Paine pumas appear to ignore the infrequent human visitors, probably because humans are neither prey nor a threat, and therefore irrelevant. We had nine days of puma tracking with a full-time guide and two trackers. As pumas are nocturnal, the best times to observe them are at dawn before they settle down to rest, and also late afternoon when they wake up, and start to walk out for their hunting trips. During our nine days of tracking, we only saw other visitors once. In the summer month of January, sunrise is just after 06:00, and sunset at around 21:20 hours, so our day started at 05:00 in the morning until around 09:00, and in the afternoon around from 16:00 hours. In other words we spent eight to nine hours a day searching for and tracking pumas. Our two trackers would drive out in advance and report back on radio in case of any sightings. Their job is not easy, pumas do

not roar like some of the other big cats, so our trackers rely on nature's own telltale signs like the guanacos' alarm call, which they sound repeatedly at the sight of a puma. Often, we waited for extended periods at a prudent distance while the pumas were resting, realizing that cats sleep a lot! To be able to capture the Patagonian wildlife at a respectful distance, we decided to carry our heavy 600 mm outfit and often used a 1.4 tele-converter, as well as a 2nd camera body with a 300 mm lens. On the first day we drew a blank - no pumas, but our guide and two-member tracking team reassured us that this would change. The next morning we were up at 04:00 and off in the dark, passing through the largely treeless landscape. It was not cold, but for us, the wind was storm strength, which is normal in these parts of Patagonia. Early in the morning, the lack of light and air pollution and unique clear skies deliver some of the most breathtaking starscapes you could ever hope to witness. We sat by a rock and waited for the darkness to lighten. Finally at around 06:00 hours our guide spotted three pumas high up on the hillside. We quickly decided to climb the hill from the opposite side to get within "shooting" range - not an easy task carrying some 15 kilos of photo equipment, but suddenly this did not matter, this was about getting images of the

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Guanaco *Lama guanicoe*

Charles Darwin described the Guanaco as “an elegant animal, with a long, slender neck and fine legs”. It is believed to be the ancestor of the domestic llama. While still common in many areas, its distribution has been impacted by hunting, habitat degradation and competition with livestock. Inside Torres del Paine, the population of more than 3,000 is stable.



Long-tailed Meadowlark *Sturnella loyca*

The striking Long-tailed Meadowlark forages mostly on the ground, often in small groups. It perches on shrubs as seen here, and it turns over pieces of dung and debris to find hidden invertebrates.

mystic puma. While our guide and trackers kept in touch on the radio, we finally saw the pumas coming our way, one hour later, and passing us before they went their separate ways to find a place for resting. Only the 2nd day, and we had already seen three pumas, and excellent images to prove it. It appeared to be siblings, one big male and two females. An amazing week followed; we saw pumas every day, apart from one. According to our guide, we observed 13-15 different pumas over a period of nine days. On day five, we had the privilege to see 4 puma siblings in the evening and just managed to take a few images before sunset.

There are lots of other wildlife in Torres del Paine apart from guanacos and pumas. Charles Darwin described the Guanaco *Lama guanicoe* as "an elegant animal, with a long, slender neck and fine legs". It is believed to be the ancestor of the domestic llama. While still common in many areas, its distribution has been severely impacted by constant hunting, habitat degradation and competition with livestock. The long-necked Guanaco migrates in large groups throughout the Torres del Paine National Park, with the exception of single males which have been ousted from the group by a dominant male during the breeding season. It is a compact animal at just over one meter high at the shoulder, but here it is easily spotted with soaring snow covered peaks as background. Guanacos form small sedentary harem groups that live

within a small territory. Females give birth to a single young, which remain with their mother for one year, at which point the dominant male drives it from his territory. Young females may quickly join another herd, whereas immature males live in bachelor groups until they are around 5 years old. Inside Torres del Paine, the current population of more than 3,000 Guanacos is stable. Several times we came across the small Grey foxes foraging for food. The Park is also home to more than 100 bird species.

General Information

After arrival in Santiago, transfer to the domestic airport for a 3.5-hour flight to Punta Arenas for an overnight stay. The following day drive to Torres del Paine, around five hours via Puerto Natales. There are several companies arranging puma tracking trips. Whenever possible use local companies and local guides to support the economy of the area. The five-star Tierra Patagonia Hotel just outside Torres del Paine National Park has a view that is hard to beat. It is an ideal, but expensive, base for puma tracking, however, there are a more economical alternatives in the area.

Torres del Paine is infamous for its strong winds especially during the summer, which is also the wet season. This is also the reason why the weather here can be entirely different from one hour to the next. Weather fronts are driven across the sky at

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Puma *Puma concolor*

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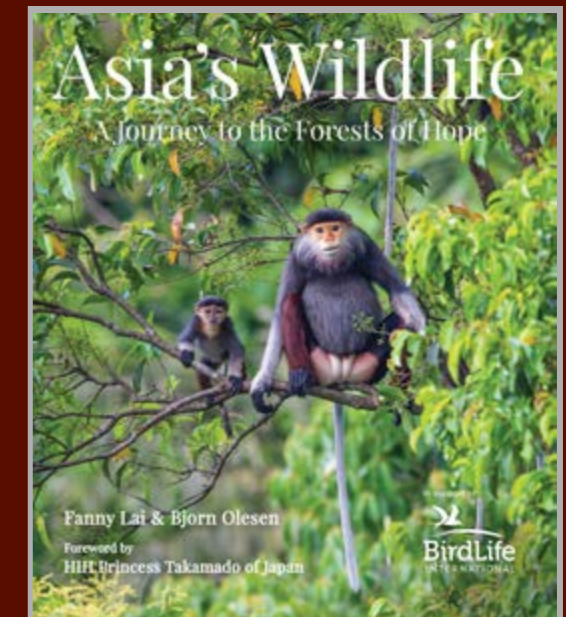


Puma *Puma concolor*

Two female pumas seen on the second day of the trip. During nine days of tracking, the author and his companion only saw other visitors once and 13-15 different pumas were encountered, including four puma siblings sighted in the evening before sunset.

a frantic speed, so by the time you've got your rain jacket out of your bag and put it on, it is often time to take it off again. Do not forget your waterproof jacket/pants, gloves and a warm hat, and to dress in layers being prepared for everything from sunshine to snowfall. The average temperature in the summer is around 13 degrees C with lows at around 1 degree C. ●

Bjorn Olesen is a retired corporate executive, award-winning wildlife photographer and a passionate conservationist. With his wife Fanny he has published three books: A Visual Celebration of Giant Pandas in 2013, and A Visual Celebration of Borneo's Wildlife in 2016. Their latest publication Asia's Wildlife: A Journey to the Forests of Hope has just been released with proceeds in support of BirdLife International and a foreword by HH Princess Takamado of Japan.





South American Grey Fox *Lycalopex griseus*
The common South American Grey Fox has a body length of around 60 cm and weighs up to four kg. Its preferred diet consists of hares and other rodents, but it will happily eat any leftovers from a puma kill, such as Guanacos.



Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus*

The Andean Condor is one of the park's 15 breeding species of birds of prey. Here is a female in a friendly attack on a male condor while soaring alongside the peaks of Patagonia. As their name suggests, the Andean Condors are found in mountainous regions, but also live near coasts awash with ocean breezes and strong thermal air currents.



A rare sight of four puma siblings, seen on day five of the author's expedition to Torres del Paine National Park.



The Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melancoryphus* is part of the Park's avifauna.



The European Hare *Lepus europaeus* was introduced to Argentina in 1880.



Darwin's Rhea *Rhea pennata*

The common Darwin's Rhea is a South American relative of the African ostrich. Interestingly, the males are "single" parents, building the nests and incubating the eggs, whereas the females enjoy a life of leisure.



The Magellan Goose *Chloephaga picta* is common in the area. The female is on top.



The Southern Caracara *Caracara plancus* is a highly opportunistic raptor.



The nocturnal Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunk *Conepatus humboldtii* is about 35cm long.



The long-necked Guanaco is a compact animal at just over one meter high at the shoulder.



Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus*

The black and white Andean Condor is among the largest flying species in the world, weighing up to a massive 15 kg. The surging thermals of Patagonia's cliffs are the ideal setting for this majestic bird. A wingspan of more than three meter, the largest of any land bird, enables this remarkable scavenger to stay in the air with minimal efforts.



Spectacular landscapes Torres del Paine National Park offers some of the finest natural spectacles in Patagonia.



High luxury The five-star Tierra Patagonia Hotel just outside Torres del Paine National Park has a view that is hard to beat.