

Bird & Mammal Trip Report  
North Chile (Sep-Oct 2023)



*Rob Jansen*  
photography

# Introduction

## About us

We are two enthusiastic nature lovers who travel the world together to search for stunning birds, fascinating mammals and incredible nature. Our world travel started in October 2021 in Chile, where we bought a car to drive through South-America in search of birds and mammals for about 2 years.

**Rob Jansen** is a biologist and wildlife photographer, and thus has a lot of knowledge about species and ecology. He's enthusiastic about all that's in nature, but mainly photographs birds and mammals.

**Romy Jansen-Houtzager** is a marketing professional. Our social media accounts, the look and feel of this report and the website are her work. In the field, she is an excellent spotter and very patient (give me some of her patience ...and hurry!).



**Rob** scanning from within a sleeping bag



**Romy** at Geysers el Tatio

## Information and how to use this trip report

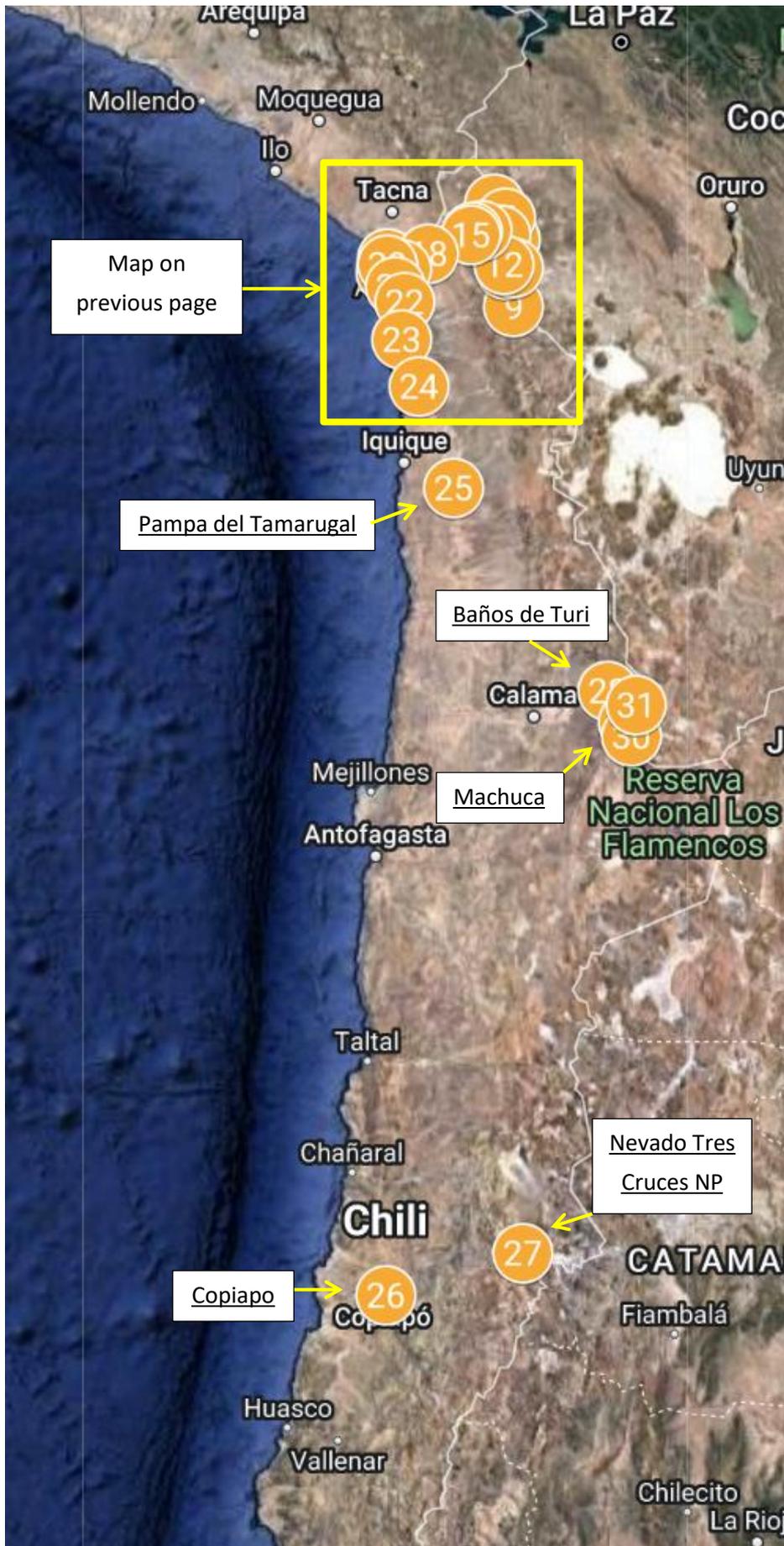
This trip report covers the region of northern Chile. We travelled this part of Chile from the 26<sup>th</sup> of September – 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2023. For all photos of our Chile trip, comments, compliments, any specific questions, visit and/or contact us via our website. We would love to hear from you!

🌐 [www.robjansenphotography.com/chile](http://www.robjansenphotography.com/chile)    📷 [www.instagram.com/robjansenphotography](https://www.instagram.com/robjansenphotography)

Species are highlighted in this trip report: **blue for birds**, **red for mammals** and **green for herpetofauna**. Target species which we missed at a specific spot are written in *italic*. This gives you an idea which species to pay extra attention to. All observations made by us in Chile can be found on Observation.org. We observed a total of about 120 bird species and 11 mammal species in northern Chile. Click here for the: [total bird list](#), [total mammal list](#) or [the total species list](#).

For more trip reports see our website: [www.robjansenphotography.com/trip-reports](http://www.robjansenphotography.com/trip-reports)





We made a [map in Google My Maps](#) with pointers of interesting trails and places and specific bird and mammal locations. You can view this map, download the points and add them to your own map (click on the three dots above the legend and download the KML file and drag this to your own map), or add them in the app 'Maps.me'. Maps.me has most walking trails on it and is usable offline. Route navigation by car doesn't always work great and it's better to use Google Maps for that purpose.

## Weather and timing

We visited northern Chile as part of our world travel from the 26<sup>th</sup> of September – 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2023. The weather was generally good and exactly what to be expected; dry, warm in the lowlands and cold and windy in the highlands. Most bird and mammal species are resident in this area, except for waders along the coast, the endemic Conebill and seabirds if you want to do a pelagic with [Albatross Birding](#) from Arica.

## Transportation

Our transportation in Chile was of course our Toyota 4Runner SR5 4.0 2010 (2WD) called 'Forrest'. We bought this car in Santiago (Chile) and got it converted so that we could sleep in it as well. Our 2WD did well in the north of Chile and we only had trouble on some sandy roads towards a lake. Main roads are generally really good, but gravel roads can be bad ripio/washboard for some parts.



Our loyal friend Forrest at Pampas Chaca



Forrest at the CONAF Station Salar de Surire

## Literature

- Birds of Chile, Helm Field Guides, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2021, Daniel Martínez Piña & Gonzalo Gonzáles Cifuentes. *The English version of the guide for birders in Chile. Drawings are good, especially the extra drawings of birds in flights and specific details. ID Descriptions are not the best, as they don't always describe what you want to know. Also they don't mention the months of occurrence in Chile for migratory birds.*
- Mammals of the Southern Cone, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, 2020, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Lynx. *Happy that Lynx decided to make mammals guides. This book is small and easy to take along and has all the mammals in there! For naturalists who are interested in the bigger fauna (not being bats, mice etc)*

*this guide should suffice.*

- BirdNet app for recording the bird sounds. *If you don't know all the sounds, BirdNet can give a possible ID.*
- iOverlander app for camping places. *This app gives nice information on where to camp or buy stuff.*
- Add this number to your contacts: +54 9 11 5349 5987. You can forward Spanish voice messages you get in WhatsApp and it will transcribe and translate to the language of your choosing!

## Equipment

**Photography:** Sony A9 II + 200-600mm + 1.4x converter + Sony 24-105mm, GoPro Hero 9

**Binoculars and telescope:** Swarovski EL 8x32 WB, Eden 8x32 XP, Swarovski 65HD + 25-50mm

**Heat scope/Thermal imager:** Lahoux Spotter Elite 35V ([lahouxbirding.com](http://lahouxbirding.com)). A great heat scope from a company in The Netherlands. I owned other brands, but we are super happy with the sharpness, modes and light weight of this heat scope! More here: [robjansenphotography.com/lahouxbirding](http://robjansenphotography.com/lahouxbirding)

**Spotlighting:** Fenix HT18 Long Distance Flashlight (powerful, very focussed and my preferred choice for open areas), Fenix TK35 2018-edition (less powerful and focussed than the HT18, but still very strong and nice for spotlighting), Fenix FD41 Focus Flashlight.

## Use of cell phones in Chile

Due to a law in Chile all cell phones have to be registered officially in order to function with a Chilean SIM. Sometimes phones work without registration, but if you don't register within 30 days after arrival, it might get blocked. Probably the whole idea is to prevent stolen phones to be used in Chile. Registration can already be done when you are home. We did it for free via this website: <https://service.dekra.cl/insc-admin/en/ex-paso01.html>. They need some info on your phone, and it takes about 1-2 days to register officially (you will receive an email). Our phones could not automatically select a Chilean provider. We had to adjust the following settings: turn the international roaming on and select the only 3G mobile network. Then our provider in the Netherlands did a SIM reset. This took 15 minutes while our phone was turned off and the SIM card was removed from our mobile. After that we turned on our phones and were able to select the mobile network 'Entel Network'.

A bit of a hassle, but nothing to worry if you do this back home already. A good local provider is WOM, and you can go to any WOM-store and ask for a 'chip' and they should give you one for free with already some Mb on it as well. They can help you activating it. Recharging can be done via the app with a credit card (Recargar -> Prepago) or at the counters of supermarkets and sometimes pharmacies as well. WOM mostly has unlimited usage of WhatsApp after you recharge it.

## Cash / ATM's

We have two different debit cards and two credit cards with us when we travel. As the debit cards are the cheapest to use (1.0% respectively 1.2% foreign transaction fee), we try those debit cards (Maestro) most of the time. Getting cash at an ATM gives the same transaction fees, so as long as the local bank doesn't charge us for the withdrawal, it's better to pay in cash than credit cards for us. The maximum amount of Chilean Pesos (CLP/\$) which can be obtained is 200.000CLP per withdrawal. We only found Scotia Bank to charge nothing for a withdrawal, with most other banks charging between 5.000-7.500CLP per withdrawal. It might differ depending on your own bank, but for us Scotia Bank saved us a lot of fees.

## 19% TAX

There is a local law which states that Chileans and foreign people that live in Chile have to pay 19% tax (mostly at hotels). You don't have to pay this as a foreigner, as long as you pay in USD! So make sure they charge the hotel on your credit card in USD. Once you pay in CLP (cash or card) you are charged the 19% tax as well.

## Water-to-Go

To reduce plastic usage on our travels we bought Water-to-Go water bottles. Read about our experience with Water-to-Go on our website: [www.robjansenphotography.com/water-to-go](http://www.robjansenphotography.com/water-to-go). The bottle and filters are not too expensive, and you will have your investment back within one holiday. If you order with the voucher **RJANSEN15** you will get **15% discount** as well! Check the website here: [www.watertogousa.com](http://www.watertogousa.com) (United States of America, Canada), [www.watertogo.eu](http://www.watertogo.eu) (United Kingdom) or [www.watertogo.shop](http://www.watertogo.shop) (most countries in the EU).



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## Visited sites

### Lauca NP & RN Las Vicuñas

[-18.23647, -69.1824](#)

**Visited dates:** 26-28 September & 1-6 October 2023

The part below focuses on our days in Lauca National Park, Reserva Nacional Las Vicuñas (including Monumento Nacional Salar de Surire). Here we mainly searched for the elusive and rare Andean Mountain Cat and the supposedly more common Colocolo/Puna Pampas Cat. We want to thank all the people that have written reports about these cats, and especially Ben Schweinhart who also included coordinates of sightings he made. I really want to encourage more people to do so -instead of just writing that one saw it or give a very vague location-, as that helps greatly in the field. The cat will most likely not be there at that exact point, but it does give an idea about habitat. On top of that it is so nice to know that someone has seen a cat at that specific spot as it gives extra motivation to continue that little bit longer at night to 'just check that one spot one more time' and keep spirits up.



**Vicuña**

**Vicuñas with Volcán Parí**

#### Methods

The locations where we searched, exact times, methods etc. are described in the paragraphs below. Generally we would search at night from sunset/20.15 until 00.00/02.00 depending on the route, weather and tiredness, and again from 05.00-07.00. Most of the spotlighting was done by car, getting out at viewpoints, climbing up hills etc. At some places we mainly walked and spotlighted on foot.

The first two days we focussed on some bird targets we had left, but the other days we scanned the seemingly endless landscape for little fur balls with binoculars and a telescope from 07.00-11.00/12.00 (when the heat haze would get too much for proper scanning) and again from 16.00-19.00. Scanning was done from good vantage points. It does feel like buying a lottery ticket, knowing that changes of winning are very, very slim, but you keep your hopes up for some weird reason.

### Weather

Evenings were cold; mostly between 1 and 4 °C (but some nights starting at 7-9 °C around 20.15). The wind took up speed from noon until midnight and this very strong wind made it feel well below freezing point on most nights. Despite wearing two layers of thermal clothing, a thick wind protecting buff, a hat and gloves (incl. extra liners), we still felt very cold! Warming our hands to the car heater that was blowing heat into the car was necessary to be able to hold the flashlight after an hour or so, and the tingling sensation in our hands felt like our fingers being grinded to life. Mornings were colder, between -3 and -9 °C, but the wind was less strong.

### Fuel Logistics

There is no gas station anywhere outside Arica in the north, so be sure to fill up properly and buy an extra jerrycan or two at a COPEC gas station. In case of emergency (or on your way up) you can buy gasoline for 1.5-2x the normal price at some restaurants and shops in Putre (ask around or see the app iOverlander for locations). Coming from Bolivia we had cheap and low-quality gasoline and no extra tanks (not allowed across the border), so we had to go back to Arica after 3 nights. There we filled up 2 jerrycans with 23L each. Our car is a big drinker (almost to be submitted to Combustibles Anonymous) and driving from sea level to 4400m we already filled up 1.5 jerrycans just to reach Salar de Surire. As we liked spotlighting on foot more than driving we used way less those next 5 nights, leaving us with more than enough fuel.



Landscape in PN Lauca

High altitude bog with Volcán Parinacota

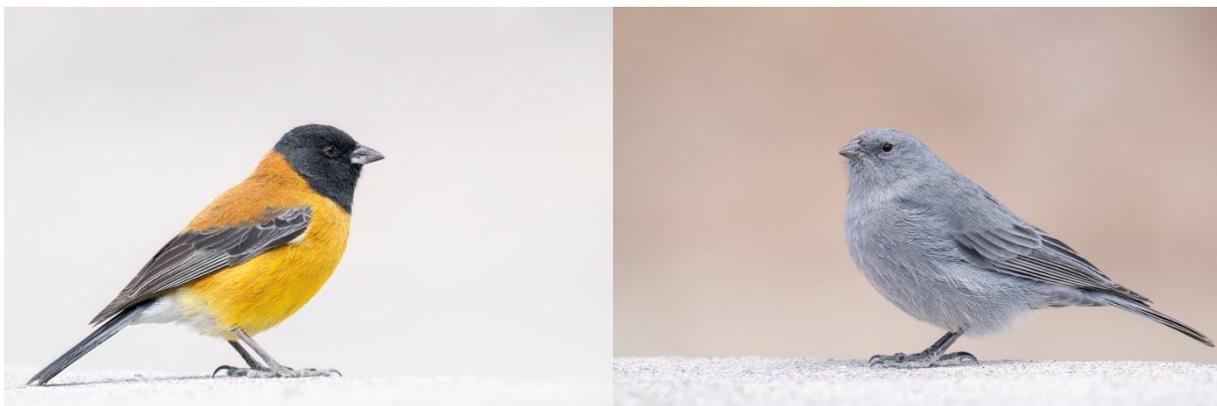
### Accommodation

We camped in our car, but as nights are very cold and get very windy; think twice about camping. Possible places to stay are:

- **Parinacota – Hotel Utu Kala** (-18.202555, -69.268451). Reserve per WhatsApp (+56 988 953 373) or email ([leonel\\_parinacota@hotmail.com](mailto:leonel_parinacota@hotmail.com)) with Don Leon (Spanish, he will use Google Translate for English). He has many rooms and beds (with electric blankets and showers). Reserving in advance doesn't seem necessary, but is recommended. Price is about 34kCLP p.p. including breakfast and dinner.

- **Guallatire – Casa de Hospedaje Guallatire** (-18.497676, -69.153868). Reserve per WhatsApp (+56 999 733 661) with Betty. Price is about 20kCLP p.p. including breakfast. They only have 3 rooms, and they were fully booked when we informed for the trip report. Be sure to reserve in advance.
- **Guallatire – CONAF Ranger Station** (-18.498159, -69.153492). If you are camping or want a cheap option, try to contact CONAF up front via their website. Bikers with a tent are often allowed to pitch the tent inside one of the CONAF buildings or sleep on one of the beds for free. They're not always present, so don't count on this one if not reserved in advance.
- **Lauca Cruzani – Casa Doña Julia** (-18.520676, -69.222031). This would be our preferred accommodation in the south. Price is 20kCLP (bathroom reached via outside) or 25kCLP (big and very decent house with 4 double bed and a kitchen!) p.p. including all meals. Julia is a sweetheart and the house is actually very decent for what you would expect for such a location. All supplies come from Arica (once in 2 weeks), so reserve well in advance or bring your own food. Reservations can be made via her son Gilberto Caris via WhatsApp (+56 933 700 028), who will arrange the stay with Julia.
- **Salar de Surire - CONAF Ranger Station** (-18.853375, -69.143295). Same principle as in Guallatire. We only met the ranger on the 3<sup>rd</sup> night, so again; don't count on this one without prior reservation.

We will describe the locations visited below and after all the paragraphs include a final note of what we would do if we would ever go searching for the cats again.



**Black-hooded Sierra-finch**

**Plumbeous Sierra-finch**

## Lake Chungará

[-18.23647, -69.1824](#)

Coming from Bolivia we first came along Lake Chungará. Making several stops along the lake we soon added a lot of species to the Chile list, including two lifers at our first stop (-18.282369, -69.135667); **Andean Avocet** and **Andean Flamingo**. Other species observed are the ones that can be expected at most water bodies at this altitude; **Andean Goose**, **Puna Ibis**, **Andean Gull**, **Yellow-billed Teal**,

**Crested Duck, Puna Teal, Andean Duck, Giant Coot, Andean Coot, Northern Silvery Grebe, Andean Swallow**, and in the right season; **Wilson's Phalarope** and **Baird's Sandpiper**.



**Wilson's Phalarope**



**Puna Ibis**

It took a bit longer (and a second afternoon) to find **Puna Plover**, which we eventually found between some low green plants on dry, salt-covered ground (-18.2702, -69.1613). At the CONAF ranger station (-18.25106, -69.17685) **Black-hooded Sierra-finches** were eating from our hands. On the rocky slopes behind we found our first **Common Mountain Viscachas**, which proved to be common everywhere on rocky slopes near grassy plains. **Vicuñas** were a pretty sight with the lake and the volcanoes in the background, and like the Viscachas they proved common everywhere on the altiplano.

At our last stop (-18.236471, -69.182404) we observed **Ochre-naped Ground-tyrant, Puna Ground-tyrant** and **Bolivian Big-eared Mouse** feeding on the strip of land between the shrubs and the water. A lone **White-tufted Grebe** was a nice addition to the Chile list.



**Bolivian Big-eared Mouse**



**Bolivian Big-eared Mouse**

## **Parinacota bodefal**

**[-18.21929, -69.31818](#)**

We birded Parinacota bodefal (wetland) from the main road (-18.21929, -69.31818) and by walking a bit between the different lakes by taking a dirt road (-18.21648, -69.31725). This is where we

observed all three Flamingo species that Chile has to offer; **Chilean Flamingo**, **Andean Flamingo** and **James's Flamingo**! We also observed **Andean Avocet** again among all the other usual suspects.



**Chilean Flamingo**

**Andean Flamingo and Chilean Flamingo**

## Parinacota/A-93/A-159

[-18.05478, -69.2029](#)

Taking Ruta A-181 (-18.220272, -69.287374) we birded the wetlands all the way towards Parinacota, mainly in search of **White-throated Sierra-finch**, which we failed to find here. On this road and along the A-93 -which also leads from the highway towards Parinacota- we found many **Common Mountain Viscachas**. In our search for Colocolo and Andean Mountain Cat we spotlighted the main road going past Parinacota and more northerly on two nights (see figure below). Both nights we started around 20.20 and spotlighted our way until the intersection of the A-93 with the A-159 (-18.090928, -69.27066). We drove the A-93 towards the second intersection with the A-159 (-17.928675, -69.332716). As you can guess one can make a loop, which was recommended to us by Lennart Verheuvél –who we thank for all his tips on searching for the cats!–. The loop is almost completely paved (except for a couple of km with some ripio/washboard at the northern part of A-159) with few houses next to the road, making it perfect spotlighting.

One evening we drove the loop counter-clockwise, the other evening clockwise. Both nights this loop took about 2.5h to drive, after which we parked it somewhere and camped in our car around 23.30/00.00. Both nights we woke up again in the morning (04.30 and 05.00) to start spotlighting again 10 minutes later. Both mornings we went to the south-eastern bend of the A-159 near Caquena (-18.05478, -69.2029), where we encountered the highest concentration of Viscachas. We then drove back south to Parinacota to spotlight the Viscacha colonies around there before sunrise.

End result: 0 **Colocolo**, 0 **Andean Mountain Cat**, 2 **Andean Fox**, 1 **Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk**, countless **Mountain Viscachas** and 1 police car that asked what we were doing (but only wished us good luck when we said we were searching for wild cats).



Parinacota & loop A-93/A-159 (via Caquena), with coordinates given for the two intersections



Andean Flamingo



Crested Duck

## Parinacota town

[-18.20256, -69.26848](#)

Chronologically we first went to other places, but due to its location we mix up the order in the report to keep the overview. On our 8<sup>th</sup> and last night we decided to return to Parinacota, but this time we would not drive the loop north but spotlighted mostly on foot around town. We drove the main road (A-93) around town and looped back via the secondary road going past Parinacota and along the wetland (yellow in figure underneath). Along the road are many rocky parts with 100s of Mountain Viscachas. As some points we would get out of the car to scan the surrounding (the pull-out at -18.211288, -69.275079 for example gives a surprising extra field of view). On advice of the hotel owner and occasional Viscacha hunter Leon we also walked near Parinacota towards a wetland. He had seen a cat several times when going to hunt for the Viscachas. We couldn't find the place he talked about, but there are many rocky slopes along the wetland that have Viscachas in low numbers and some rocky hills farther away make for good vantage points to scan the surroundings (red in figure underneath). We tried to get info at the CONAF ranger station (-18.200879, -69.267792), but there was nobody there. This was unfortunate as during the night some locals came up and thought we were robbing things (from a landscape that is barren except for stones?!), then demanded that we ask permission from the police and then suddenly wanted money for walking on private land (which is not, as the walk is in Lauca NP where CONAF has a trail as well, and the roadside is public too of course).



**Common Mountain Viscacha**



**Andean Fox/Culpeo**

We first parked the car (-18.2012288, -69.270494) and started walking the sandy trail, taking a left at the small path of CONAF marked by little stones. Climbing on rocks and scanning around we observed some Viscachas and regularly collapsed with our feet in holes of Highland Tuco-tucos. Climbing on top of a rocky hill we observed eyeshine far away, but good enough to be sure it was (finally after 8 nights!) a cat! I only picked up eyeshine every now and then, and making squeaking sounds helped to locate it as it would often look in another direction (thus no eyeshine). It looked like it had a very long and bushy tail. We made sure we had a reference of where it was (the landscape looks all the same and you easily lose direction zigzagging down a rocky slope). Once we were near the spot where the cat would have been we couldn't find anything for a while. We then saw eyeshine coming from the hill we just came from a couple of 100m back! We ran back and the

cat was at the exact spot we had been 5-10 minutes before. The cat disappeared behind rocks, but playing sounds of a rabbit and/or mouse in distress seemed to get its attention (again thanks Lennart!). It looked over the rocks and allowed for good views from the front. As we had seen the long tail and the nasal area looked totally black looking through binoculars, we thought we had Andean Mountain Cat. We tried to climb back up the hill, but once there the cat had crossed a big field and was at least 200m away again. We followed as fast as we could, but by the time we'd finally reached the very hill it was on, it was already on the next one even farther away. Frustrating how cats don't care about the fact we were not acclimatized to the altitude yet ;-). We pursued to the next place anyways and arriving there we found the cat on the other side of a big stream. We were able to watch it for a while, and only then were we able to properly check all the features; pink rhinarium; two stripes on the cheeks; full black rings around the legs; horizontal pattern on the back (difficult to assess while it sat down house-cat-like). This was **Puna Pampas Cat/Colocolo**! We then tried to lure it closer with the mouse distress calls. Suddenly we observed eyeshine on the very hill we stood next to, but it hid behind a bush and we could only see two triangular ears (another cat!). This one disappeared in between the rocks and wasn't seen again. We watched the other cat another 5-10 minutes while it sat down, looking around seemingly relaxed. We decided to cross the stream and try to get closer for a better picture. Of course despite activating stealth mode it was gone from the spot and we only got another short glimpse of a cat watching us from atop a rock before it too disappeared between rocks and wasn't seen again.

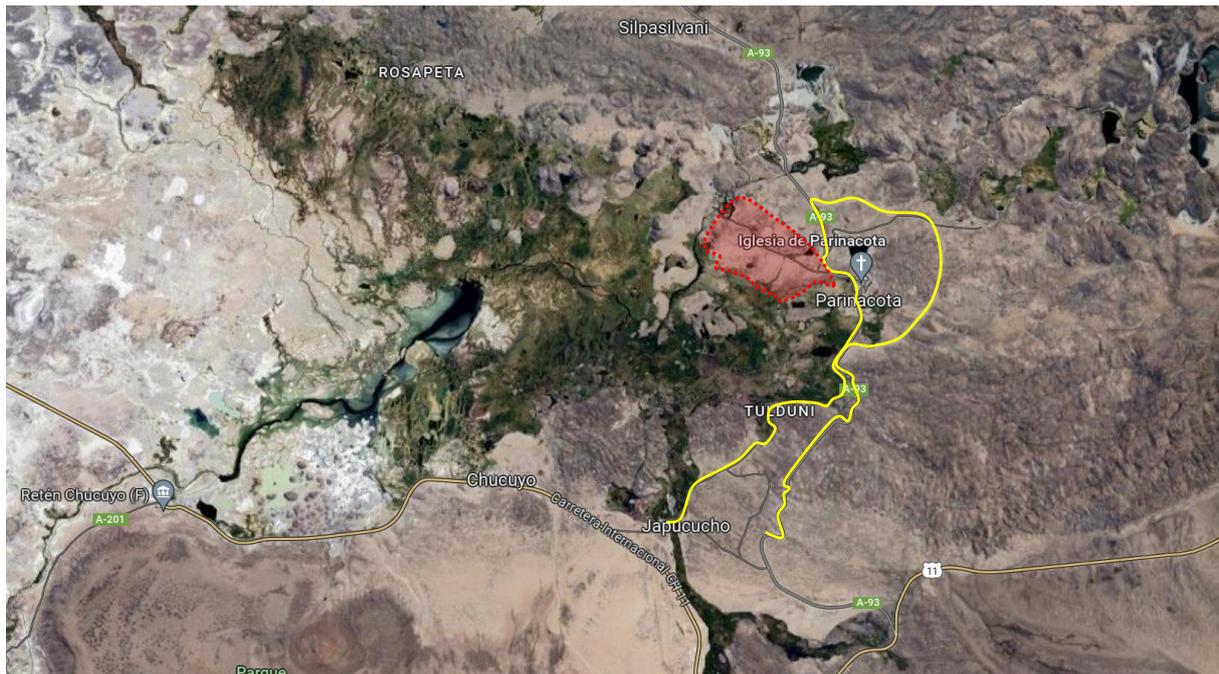


**Puna Pampas Cat/Colocolo**

**Puna Pampas Cat/Colocolo**

I was very happy I had photos of the first time we saw the cat, as in the field we were as good as convinced it was Andean Mountain Cat. Checking the photos this turned out to be Puna Pampas Cat too, but another individual judging by pattern differences (probably the one that disappeared in the rocky hill close to us on 'our' side of the stream). The rinary colour just couldn't be properly assessed by us during the short observation. Likewise the tail length was probably deceiving from a large distance (assuming the photographed cat was the same cat we had seen in the distance). Lesson learned: try to get photos, even crappy ones. It is very easy to miss-ID these species with a quick observation in the field even when knowing the key ID features very well from literature/reference photos.

Unfortunately no Andean Mountain Cat, but we were still very happy that we had at least 1 cat species! We were so hyped we continued until 02.30 that night around Parinacota. We drove the road 2 more times (the total loop by car and walking to good observation points took us about 1h) and again walked the field one more time, hoping to get another look at the Pampas Cats. After that we drove past the CONAF ranger station Las Cuevas and through the canyon towards Putre as people had seen Andean Mountain Cat along the road near Las Cuevas too. End result of this night: 2 **Puna Pampas Cat/Colocolo**, 0 **Andean Mountain Cat**, 1 **Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk** (along the main road around Parinacota), countless **Common Mountain Viscachas**.



Parinacota Town with the road driven (yellow line) and part good for walking (red shape)

## Misitune – Lauca Cruzani - Guilatire

[-18.52082, -69.22206](#)

The 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2023 we took the turn-off towards Misitune and Guilatire (-18.182218, -69.41845 coming from Arica/Putre; or -18.218161, -69.321577 coming from Parinacota). The road is (washboard) gravel but driveable with any vehicle. It looks like they are about to pave most of the road towards Salar de Surire in the coming years.

### Guilatire towards Salar de Surire

Once in Guilatire we waited until dark and spotlighted our first night towards Salar de Surire (see paragraph below). The 3<sup>rd</sup> of October we spotlighted back from Salar de Surire. Only the first ±10km and last ±5km out of 50km seemed more interesting to us, and we only encountered 1 **Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk**.

**Lauca river/Lauca Cruzani/Guallatire**

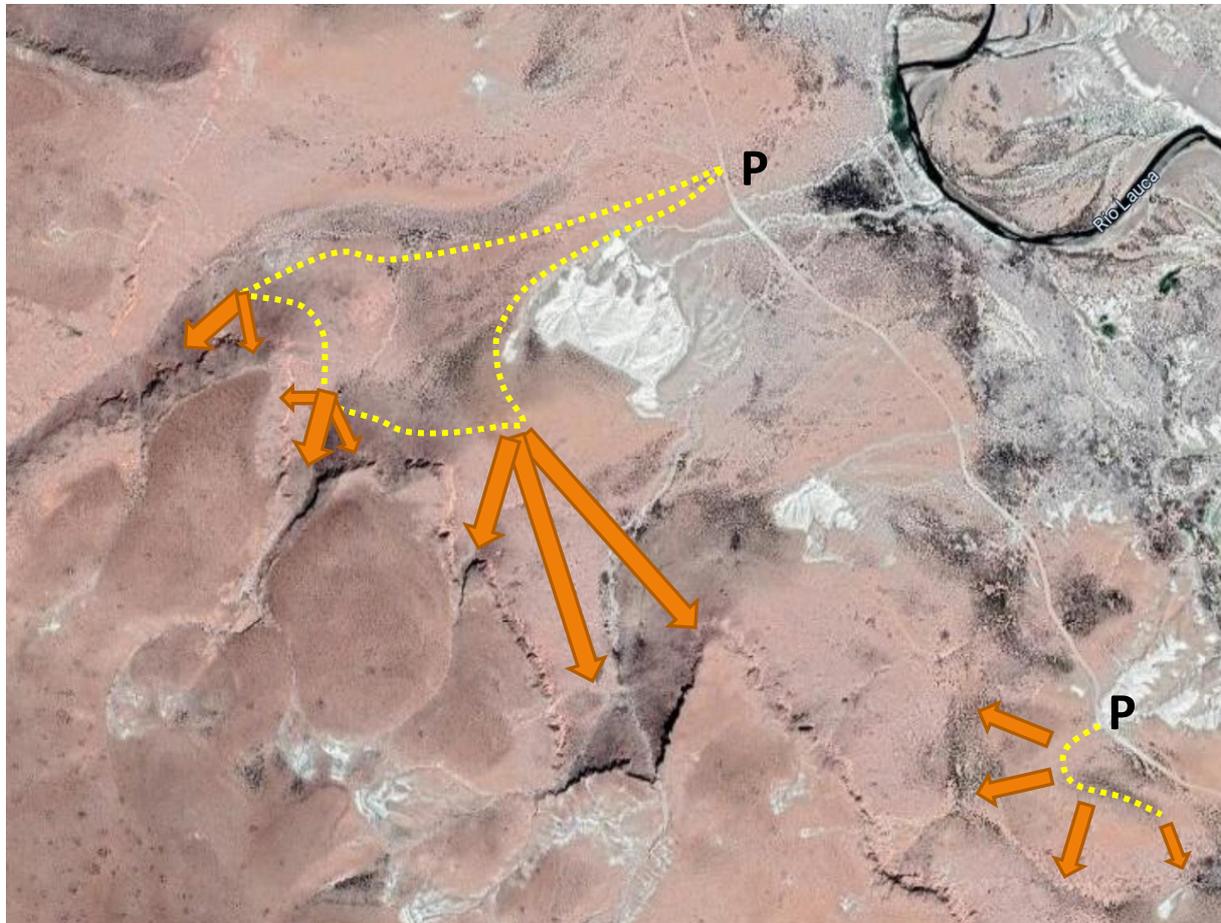
We found the route from Guallatire going south for 7.5km and then going west (-18.55351, -69.157512) on the A-245 towards Misitune more interesting. Surprisingly this road is paved, except for a shallow crossing of a stream (doable with any car). We suspect the road is paved all the way until Misitune from here, but we didn't drive it all the way. One night we drove a loop, going over the A-245, crossing the Lauca river (more like a wetland; -18.475441, -69.246662), going east at Ancuta again (-18.450487, -69.199978) back to Guallatire. Not recommended per se, but the part until and a few km behind the Lauca wetland is interesting. We had a cat species there, but it was too far to see which one it was and we couldn't cross in a straight line due to the swampy habitat in between. When we tried to get closer by going around we couldn't find it again unfortunately. Given the habitat we suspect *Colocolo/Puna Pampas Cat*, but we can't be 100% sure. *Andean Fox/Culpeo* was seen a couple of times along this transect too, especially along the A-245.

**Slate-colored Coot/Andean Coot****Andean Flamingo****Lauca Cruzani**

Lauca Cruzani is a hamlet with two houses and tourist accommodation (see intro). The owner of the homestay and her neighbour say there are Puma and smaller cats around. Their cattle go in a corral at night to protect them against cats (and they lose quite a big percentage to wildlife). The A-245 road going past Lauca Cruzani parallels the river lower down. Most of the surrounding landscape consists of high rounded hills.

Just south of Lauca Cruzani is a very interesting landscape feature with steep cliffs, canyons and rocky slopes with many *Common Mountain Viscachas* on them. We parked the car next to the sign saying *Lauca Ancalle* (-18.549896, -69.214777) and then walked towards the canyons (see yellow dotted line in figure below). Already while walking over the field we spotted a recently killed Llama. In the sandy riverbed towards the canyons we observed Puma tracks going both directions. More inside the canyons we also saw smaller cat tracks, but in the soft sand we couldn't distinguish the species -if that is possible for the two smaller cat species at all-. Other mammal watchers have seen both cat species nearby this location. From the northern canyon we walked south towards the second canyon. After this we climbed up the hill and scanned the third valley south of the hill. Scanning was both

done during the day as well as during the night. During the day it took about 2h to scan this part, at night it took about 1h including walking. A bit more southeast along the road is another point where we parked (-18.557332, -69.209783) and climbed up the smaller hill south of there. The surrounding valley is not very big, but there are a fair amount of Viscachas here too.



Landscape feature south of Lauca Cruzani with canyons. Parking (P), route walked (yellow dotted lines) and viewpoints (orange arrows) are given.

We searched 2 mornings, 1 afternoon and 1 night (2x) in the valleys. We wanted to repeat it another morning, but after stopping the car to check something the water from a small river crossing froze the handbrake against the very cold metal. Suddenly we couldn't continue anymore at 05.00 in the morning and decided to sleep in our car in the middle of the road until the sun had come up and unfrozen our handbrake. We didn't find any cats inside the canyons, but this location would definitely be one of the locations we would check often if we would do it all over again.

Bird-wise we got our only **Puna Tinamous** along the A-245 road, as well as a couple of **(Puna) Lesser Rhea** on the wetland between the canyons and the accommodation.

Young **Vicuña****(Puna) Lesser Rhea**

## Salar de Surire - CONAF Ranger Station

[-18.85316, -69.14327](#)

Monumento Nacional Salar de Surir wasn't as pretty as we had hoped. The salt flat is nice, but with all the tractors harvesting the salt we expected more -or were we just spoiled with the salt flats in Bolivia?-. We did see **(Puna) Lesser Rhea** along the salar, as well as all three Flamingo species, **Andean Avocet** and **Puna Plover** (from here and more east; -18.792984, -69.0874280).

The first night we arrived after spotlighting from Guallatire and decided to first check another Viscacha colony mentioned in the report of Ben. Therefor we parked the car (-18.807357, -69.167955) and climbed up the hills towards the point given for the Viscacha colony. Arriving at the exact coordinates we hadn't seen any viscachas, nor was the hill very steep or interesting. We searched around but didn't find anything on top of the hill and were a bit annoyed about the lost time and energy coming all the way up here. Walking down another route we actually found the Viscachas more down, but the numbers were way lower than at the CONAF station. If you really want to visit this location, then walk along the (dry) riverbed from the parking until you can see a rocky slope (from here: -18.81417, -69.165699). This way you don't have to climb all the way up.

**Vicuñas****Vicuñas**

The main reason to come to Salar de Surire was the Viscacha colony behind the CONAF Ranger station. Driving up there a military truck followed us, honked, overtook us and blinked its warning

lights. After 2 years in South America we know that people honk as a courtesy warning when overpassing and blink the lights to thank you. When the truck slowed down in front of us we overtook them again. Not much later they passed by again but now blocked the whole road with the truck and jumped down to stop us. Whoops, honest mistake. Of course there was no problem at all when we explained we were searching for cats. They had seen Puma around as well as a small cat once at night behind the CONAF station. To prevent any problems, make sure to write your name down at the CONAF station and tell them how many nights you expect to search. You can also already do this in Guallatire, as they will text each other so everyone is aware. You can also go to the police post (-18.794128, -69.084833). They warned us for traffickers (drugs and cars), but we didn't encounter anyone on our nights here.



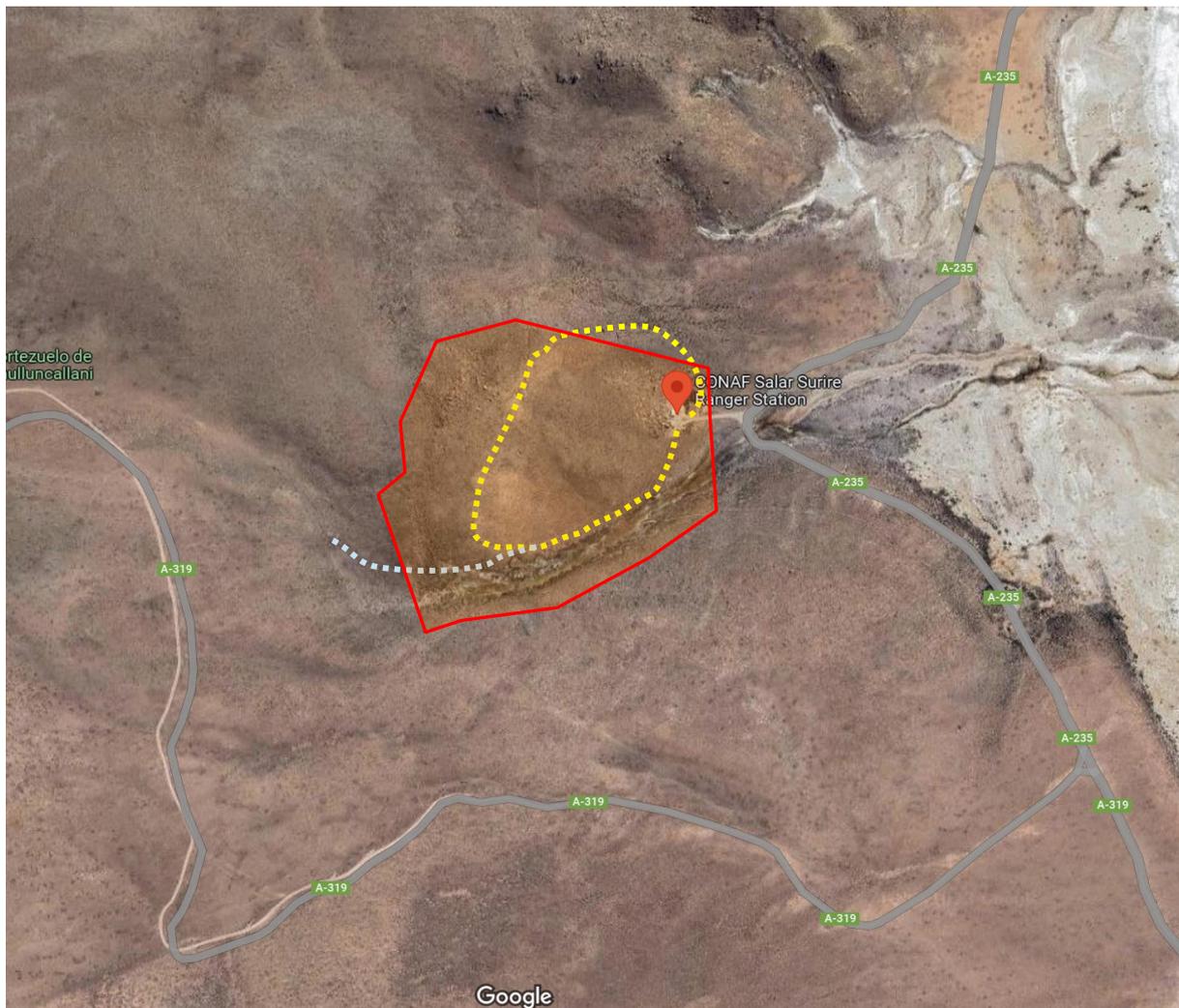
**James's Flamingo**



**James's Flamingo**

The first night at the CONAF station it was quite late so we only scanned from the parking and buildings, with which a lot of the rocks and Viscacha colony can be seen. Most of the colony is concentrated on two rocky hills above the station, but they can be found all around the valley and on other rocky outcrops (reddish part in figure below). Scanning from the parking and building was repeated in the morning before sunrise, the second evening and morning and the first part of the third evening. Besides scanning from below we also walked up the valley south of the station. One can climb up all the way to the top of the valley (yellow + bluish dotted line in figure below). At night we often walked the loop going in between the lower and higher rocks of the Viscacha colony (yellow dotted line in the figure).

We didn't find *Andean Mountain Cat*, but we heard of quite some people seeing them here. Someone on iNaturalist had it during the day here, and a ranger also commented on having seen them around 08.00 and 15.00. Other people (Ben Schweinhart and a guy from the police) had seen them during the night here. According to yet another ranger the best time would be from Dec-March, when we cats should be around more often during the day behind the station.



CONAF station (red pinpoint) at Salar de Surire. Circular route walked (yellow dotted line), route walked to the top of the valley (blue dotted line) and area with most Viscachas (area marked red)

Around the parking we found several burrows of **Highland Tuco-tuco**. The occupied ones have fresh mounds of sand in front of them and are closed. By digging a tunnel open you might lure the Tuco-tuco out. Sometimes they just fill up the tunnel from inside after it being opened, but sometimes they watch outside to see which annoying mammalwatcher let the door open. It took a while before we actually saw one. Somehow the tunnel was often open all day, until we came back from a walk around (especially later in the afternoon).

One morning we drove a bit around the lake, mainly the part past the police post (-18.794128, -69.084833). This is a good place to search for all the three Flamingo species of South America; **James's Flamingo**, **Andean Flamingo** and **Chilean Flamingo**. We also got views again of **Puna Plover** and **Andean Avocet**. Both Cat species have been seen around the lake, but intensive scanning didn't yield anything cat-wise.

**Andean Flamingo****Puna Plover**

## CONAF Ranger Station – Las Cuevas

[-18.17086, -69.42907](#)

We birded twice at the CONAF station Las Cuevas. The first day we followed the trail going up the hill opposite of the parking lot. From the top we scanned the wetland below for Cats and birds, but didn't get anything more interesting than **Andean Flicker** and **Grey-bellied Seedsnipe**. As there were rocks adjacent to grassy plains next to the parking lot, there were a couple of **Common Mountain Viscachas** here. The second morning we walked the path starting from the parking lot around 09.30 and we observed at least 4 different individuals of **Bolivian Big-eared Mouse**. We soon found our main target: **White-throated Sierra-finch**. We had searched for this species the day before in this wetland, in the bogs along the road further up and at a bog 4.3km from the station. You can park along the road and walk along this bog (-18.163039, -69.46509), which is supposed to be a good spot for this species. We only found **Highland Tuco-tuco** burrows there and of course **White-winged Diuca-finches**.

**Bolivian Big-eared Mouse****Volcán Parinacota with Chilean Flamingos**

## Searching for cats; our final thoughts

If we would go back and do it all over again, we would definitely focus more on walking than on driving. Walking allows for way better scanning of the surroundings, and by driving we believe a cat can easily be missed if it looks the other way for just a couple of seconds. The Viscacha colonies

behind the Salar de Surire CONAF station, the canyon near Lauca Cruzani, around Parinacota and northerly near Caquena would be places we would spend most of our time searching for Andean Mountain Cat and Colocolo. We would only spotlight by car in between places, or when we walked an area and want to explore another part further up. Hopefully more people will share detailed information and coordinates about where they searched and did or didn't find a cat. That will help others in their quest, as we hope this trip report helps you in yours.



Northern Silvery Grebe



Yellow-billed Teal (Inca Teal)

## Putre

[-18.17795, -69.51293](#)

**Visited dates:** 28-29 September 2023

We arrived in Putre mid-morning on the 28<sup>th</sup> and took the old road/A-149 (-18.177952, -69.512932). This road should be good for Taruca/Northern Huemel and even Colocolo has been seen here by multiple professional guides. We made some random stops along the road leading down to Putre to search for bird species we still hadn't seen yet in the neighbouring countries. This way we encountered **Streaked Tit-spinetail**, **White-throated Earthcreeper** and **Straight-billed Earthcreeper**. We also added **Greenish Yellow-finch**, **Spot-billed Ground-tyrant** and **Andean Hillstar** to the Chile list. North of Putre we walked to the edge of the small valley (from -18.19487, -69.560095) and added **White-browed Chat-tyrant** and **Creamy-breasted Canastero** (*ssp. arequipae*). We searched in vain for **Tamarugo Conebill**, a species passing by here on migration.

At night we spotlighted the A-149 from the city towards the main road and encountered a group of at least 6 **Northern Huemel/Taruca**. We then spotlighted a random road a bit east (A-23/-18.177512, -69.502312) for about 8KM, but only observed few **Common Mountain Viscachas**. We then returned to the main road, A-147, going to Putre (-18.207116, -69.549361) and spotlighted this road and the A-149 until the end again. We encountered the Tarucas again, as well as **European Hares** (introduced) and **Band-winged Nightjars**, but no Cats.

**Andean Fox/Culpeo****White-throated Earthcreeper**

The next morning we scanned the hillsides for **Colocolo**, stopping regularly along the A-149 towards Putre. We didn't see any Cats again, but did see a pair of **Northern Huemel/Taruca** along the main entrance road/A-147. On our way back the second time to Arica we again drove this road and again found the Tarucas along the A-147 in the morning.

**Northern Huemel/Taruca female****Northern Huemel/Taruca male**

## Arica and surroundings

**-18.47962, -70.31567**

**Visited dates:** 3 & 8 October 2023

### Arica - Cuevas De Anzota

**-18.54755, -70.33077**

Cuevas de Anzota are well known nowadays as a good place to observe Marine Otters. We arrived on a Saturday morning at 07.00 and parked the car in front of the gate (-18.547578, -70.330947). It was already very busy on the beach with fishermen and we weren't totally sure where the Otters were most often seen. We asked the guard at the gate, and he indicated a spot farther down the path. Officially the place is only open from 09.00-18.00 from Tuesday-Sunday, but after some discussion we were allowed in earlier. We walked the official path and then followed the small trail on the dune. We scanned the rocks and sea, but only found **South American Sea Lions**. We came to the spot

indicated (-18.561277, -70.33765) and recognized a rocky island from a blog, where that photographer had seen and photographed the Otters beautifully. We didn't find them and walked back to the parking. We decided to scan some rocks where there were no fishermen, and yes: **Marine Otter!** It was in the water, eating something while floating on its back. We were able to watch it for a while before it disappeared and we had to go back to the hotel for breakfast.

We tried it again a week later on Sunday, but it was even busier by then. Tourists walking their dogs, fishermen on the beaches and rocks, snorkelers searching for squid and crab-catchers were on the rocks everywhere. We also walked to the other spot, but didn't find any Otters. Not sure if it was because it was so busy or that they just had 'otter' things to do ;-)

Birds of note seen are **Seaside Cinclodes**, **Surfbird**, **Peruvian Booby**, **Peruvian Pelican**, **Guanay Cormorant**, and **Belcher's Gull**, all of which can be seen quite easily. We also observed 1 **Red-legged Cormorant** in the water.



**Marine Otter**

**Marine Otter**

## Arica - Humedal Rio Lluta

[-18.41634, -70.32244](#)

North of Arica is a small reserve called 'Humedal Rio Lluta'. It's not big or very interesting, but we observed our first **Killdeer** and **Slender-billed Finch** here. We also added some species to the Chile list like **Peruvian Meadowlark** and **Black Skimmer**. We hoped to see **Burmeister's Porpoise** in the water, but the sea was too rough. Pay attention to the sky for **Peruvian Martin**, which are sometimes seen here.

## Molinos

[-18.38127, -69.94495](#)

On our way from Putre to Arica we stopped in the valley of Molinos at three different points. At our first stop (-18.399041, -69.972094) we had a couple of **Slender-billed Finches**. At the next two stops (-18.381259, -69.945095 and -18.375309, -69.914598) we searched for our main target; **Rufescent Flycatcher**, which we dipped. We did see quite some nice species new for our Chile list; **Peruvian Sheartail**, **Oasis Hummingbird**, **Andean Swift**, **Chestnut-throated Seedeater** and much more.

## Museo Arqueologico San Miguel de Azapa

[-18.51565, -70.18095](#)

We had seen reports of **Rufescent Flycatcher** at the Museo Arqueologico, so we went for it. We first walked the street, but couldn't find it. We then read that someone had it in the museum gardens. Entrée is 2000CLP p.p, but as we didn't actually visit the museum we were allowed to walk around for free. It took a couple of hours (walking the small garden and the street side) before we finally found our target. **Slender-billed Finch** was again commonly seen, as well as many of the species seen at Molinos.



**Chestnut-throated Seedeater**

**Slender-billed Finch**

## Pampas Chaca

[-18.66908, -70.24149](#)

We wanted to do another Pelagic with **Albatross Birding** from Arica, but the dates didn't match with our schedule. Luckily one of the Humboldt targets can actually be seen on shore. We drove to Pampas Chaca, entering the desert via a road parallel to the power lines (-18.633924, -70.244455). The desert ground seems hard enough to drive anywhere here, but we wanted to be sure with our 2WD and followed the visible tracks. The upper layer is sand, but beneath is a firm layer of saltpetreccdc. At certain places there are natural holes, which are used by **Markham's Storm-petrel** to breed. We stopped at the first colony (-18.642087, -70.244983) but found all the nesting holes empty. We drove to the next site (-18.669084, -70.241496) and after some searching found some holes with chicks. At night around 21.00 we heard parents coming back, saw them flying through the thermal camera and observed one sitting in a hole.



**Markham's Storm-petrel nest cavity**

**Markham's Storm-petrel chick**

We are not sure if this breeding season was exceptionally long, or that there are nests until this late in the season every year. Between April and July birders have observed 1000's of Storm-petrels flying inland from the coast (-18.7491, -70.338222) and around the breeding colonies. We still had a fair amount of active nests (at least 7) and saw more than 20 adults flying around at night.

## Chaca Valley

[-18.80568, -70.15546](#)

We had few targets remaining in northern Chile, but Chilean Woodstar was one of those rare endemics we still hoped to observe. Our first stop was made in the Chaca Valley, entering a road close by the reserve (-18.803963, -70.169187). We then went to the reserve, reachable via the north side (enter here: -18.800256, -70.164275). We only encountered many **Peruvian Sheartail** and **Oasis Hummingbird**, and of course some **Slender-billed Finch**. We then searched some random places in the village and after a while found a good flowering tree with Woodstars around it (-18.80568, -70.155467). The females were near impossible to ID, as descriptions about the amount of buff and white seem to vary depending on the source. The tail was never fanned out (like Hermits do for example), so it was impossible to properly assess the tail pattern properly. After an hour or so we finally observed a male that was dancing for a female. It had a short tail, but on photos the outer feathers clearly curved inwards; **Chilean Woodstar!** We didn't get amazing views, the tail was not fully developed and one of the feathers had some white in it, making us think of a possible hybrid.



Chilean Woodstar

Probable Chilean Woodstar nest

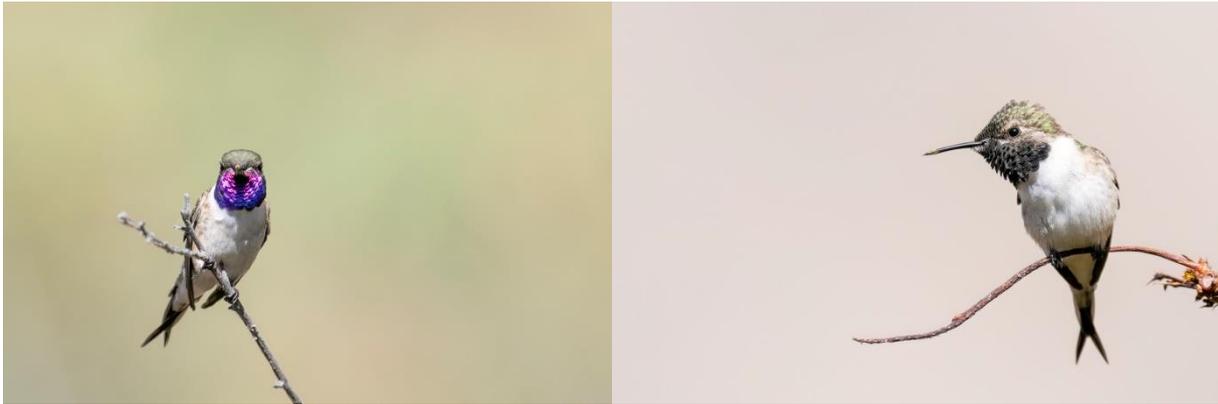
## Azapa Valley

[-19.1527, -70.1807](#)

Farther south we reached the Azapa Valley with Rio Camarones running through it. Here we hoped to see **Tamaruco Conebill** (ne), and we searched three locations with many Tamarugo trees to find it. The first location (-19.1527, -70.1807) was the most interesting, but we didn't find the Conebill. Neither did we find the Conebill at the other two locations along the road (-19.145907, -70.167859 and -19.140319, -70.158263). We did see 10's of **Cinereous Conebills** which have a similar sound and seem attracted to the playback of Tamarugo Conebill. We also observed many female Woodstars/Sheartails, and thought that we observed buffy bases at the feather tips on one photo.

We also found two probable males high in the tree tops at the second and third location, but we only observed them shortly in flight. Interestingly we encountered another **Rufescent Flycatcher** at the third forest patch.

Going back to the first location we finally found a beautiful male **Chilean Woodstar** with a properly crossed tail and beautiful gorget! We also found quite some nests in construction in the Tamarugo trees around here.



Chilean Woodstar

Chilean Woodstar

## Tarapacá Region

**Visited dates:** 9-10 October 2023

### Pampa Quiuna

[-19.55525, -70.03552](#)

After the success with Markham's Storm-petrel we hoped to see **Ringed Storm-petrel** as well in a breeding hole. We drove to a location where one had been found (-19.555258, -70.035971) and found comparable habitat as at Pampas Chaca (except the ground here should be gypsum instead of saltpeter). We found many holes, but most of them seem to have been closed with sand blown in by the wind. Some seemed relatively open though and we even had 2 holes with some down feathers in there. We marked the most interesting open holes and listened at night for Storm-petrels and scanned the holes. As might be expected we didn't hear or find any, as October might be the worst month to search for them on land. Nesting doesn't start before November/December and the last chicks have been observed in September. Interestingly we did see **Culpeo/Andean Fox** going through the supposed colony scouring the holes as well. A lizard spec. observed might be another potential (egg) predator of the Storm-petrel.

## Pampa del Tamarugal

[-20.4383, -69.70058](#)

After searching for hours and not finding the Conebill the previous days, we were happy we drove past Reserva Nacional Pampa del Tamarugal. Already when stepping out of the car we had our first **Tamarugo Conebill** (ne). This species is a breeding endemic of Chile and is only found in the park from September-January. We easily found more than a dozen by walking half an hour around the offices.



Tamarugo Conebill

Tamarugo Conebill

## Atacama Region

Visited dates: 10-12 October 2023

### Copiapó

[-27.36657, -70.33215](#)

We read an article about a new Chilean Chinchilla colony that was discovered recently. Some miners rescued a Chinchilla from dogs and brought the animal to an institution. Additional research at the location confirmed that it was indeed this species, and besides a live individual they found some evidence of their presence in the form of burrows and faeces. As we are not sure whether Chinchillas are still caught in the wild for pet trade or fur, we feel reluctant to share the location in such a public trip report. We checked out the place one evening, between 20.00 and 23.00. We expected them to live in colonies like Viscachas, coming out at night and relatively easily findable by eyeshine. We did find some faeces that were most likely of this species, and the north-facing rocky slopes looked interesting enough. Despite walking on interesting terrain and getting to the exact coordinates given in the paper, we didn't find any **Chilean Chinchillas**. In short: you can go and try, but without additional information we wouldn't waste one's holiday on it.

**Puna Teal****Andean Goose**

## Nevado Tres Cruces NP

[-27.02901, -69.05159](#)

About 150km eastwards there have been reports of Short-tailed Chinchillas. Again, as we are not sure about the risk for the Chinchillas being captured for pet trade or fur, we won't reveal the locations publicly here in this trip report.

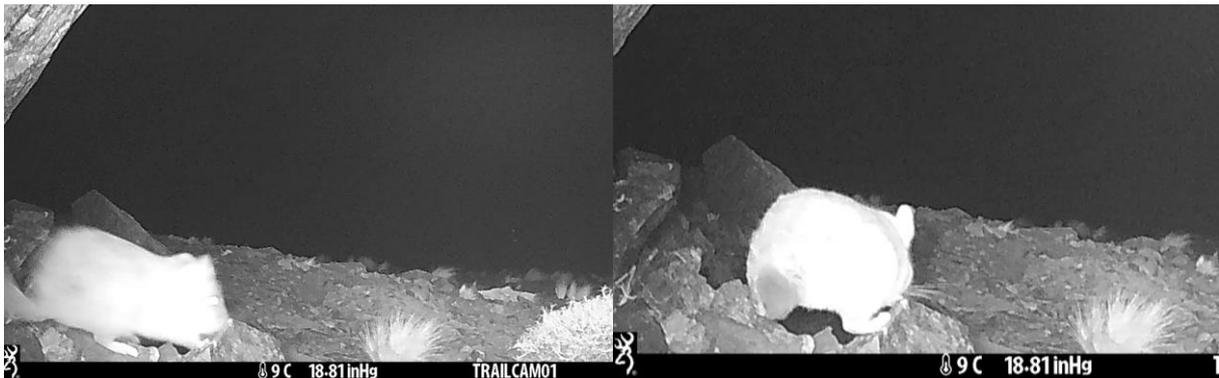
After walking about 1km to the first location we were happy to see good habitat; rocky outcrops with lots of crevices in the middle of a very arid landscape, with only some dry shrubs as food. When we climbed up towards the rocky outcrops we were even happier to see a camera trap aimed at a crevice with lots of faeces in front of it. Unfortunately when we checked the memory card from the camera trap in our laptop, we saw that it was placed in October 2022 and only ran for about 2 months. In those two months it only captured birds and zero Chinchillas. Arriving at the other end of the rocky island we found another camera trap. Again the same, and without any images of Chinchillas we decided to check another site.

**Common Mountain Viscacha****Chilean Flamingo**

This second location was next to the road, and the habitat seemed similar. While climbing the rocks there was one crevice with lot of pellets, both fresher and older. This seemed very promising to us. We checked another location, but didn't find any traces of Chinchillas there, so we focussed on the prior. We scanned in vain in the afternoon, hoping that an individual would sunbathe. At night

around 20.00 we immediately had eyeshine that reminded us of Viscacha. Walking closer this turned out to be another camera trap. This one was also placed a year before, but ran until March 2023. One of the first videos we opened was something that looked like a Chinchilla, but the tail revealed it was not a Chinchilla but a mouse or rat spec. The next video however clearly showed Short-tailed Chinchilla! This definitely looked promising, but after two videos in October 2022, there were no videos with this species. Just a lot of pictures of birds. The camera trap wasn't placed very well in our opinion, and even the time settings were wrong (thereby not allowing us to see at what time the individual was in the open). Other studies revealed activity between 18.30 and 04.30. We scanned the whole evening until after 00.00, but didn't see any Chinchillas. We then drove back to the rocky island, thinking if they are there they would be on the rocky island and thus visible. Again we came up empty handed and we gave up around 02.30 without seeing *Short-tailed Chinchilla*.

This species actually gets discovered at many new locations all the time, mainly by mining companies who have to do an ecological check. Be sure to ask around if you are in the mountainous regions of Chile or Argentina. Be aware that many locals call Viscachas 'Chinchillas' as well. We believe it's only a matter of time before one of those locations becomes more public and us mammalwatchers have a good chance of seeing such a spectacular mammal.



Screenshot from the camera trap clearly showing a *Short-tailed Chinchilla*

## San Pedro de Atacama region

Visited dates: 12-14 October 2023

### Baños de Turi

[-22.23431, -68.27904](#)

We had reports that Long-tailed Tuco-tuco/Tawny Tuco-tuco had been seen around Baños de Turi. We arrived at night and the next morning we soon found burrows of Tuco-tuco next to our camp spot (-22.2300, -68.2828). We dug open many holes, and most of them got closed within 10 minutes. We repeated this process over the morning; waiting and watching, doing a round to check the holes and opening the ones that were closed again. We spend 4 hours this way and never saw a Tuco-tuco.

We even waited just in front of a burrow, but the little rascal closed it from within, not even revealing a hind toe.

Just when we wanted to give up and drove away, we stopped to scan a big open field (-22.234317, -68.279044). It was littered with fresh mounds of earth and it didn't take long before we saw dirt flying from one of the mounds. After some waiting it stuck its head out of the burrow and later it's whole body; **Tawny Tuco-tuco!** In the end we observed a couple and we believe that even during the middle of the day chances are really good here. Photo options are of course better early in the morning when there is not too much heat haze yet.



**Red-backed Sierra-finch**

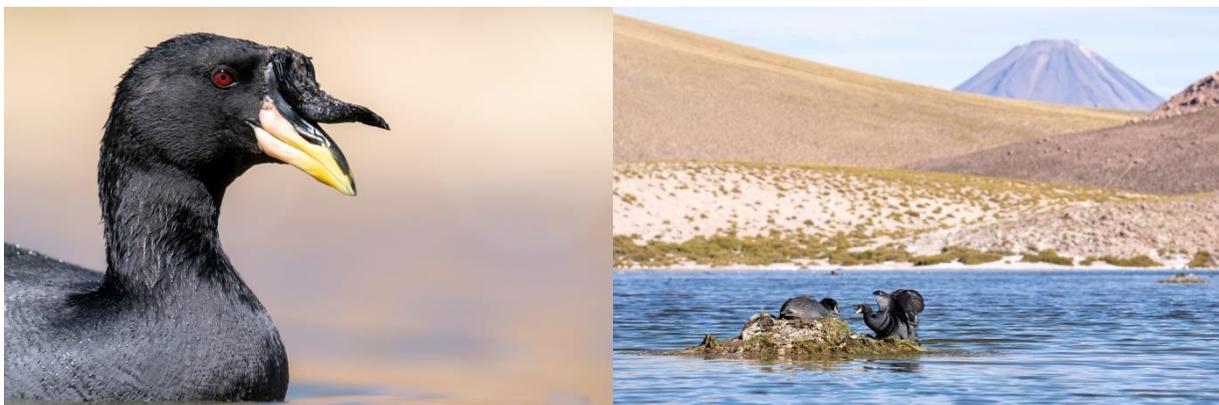
**Tawny Tuco-tuco**

## Machuca

[-22.61151, -68.05953](#)

Driving towards Machuca we stopped at a small bog (-22.50165, -68.064915) adjacent to the Rio de Juana. It didn't take long to find our target; **Red-backed Sierra-finch**. At least 6 individuals were foraging quietly on the short grass next to the stream.

At Machuca we easily found our last target; **Horned Coot**. This one was ridiculously easy, as it was building nests a couple of meters from the shoreline, close to the road. Other species observed here were **Andean Avocet**, **Andean Flamingo**, **Northern Silvery Grebe** and again **Red-backed Sierra-finches**.



**Horned Coot**

**Male Horned Coot feeding the female on the nest**

After visiting the famous Geysers el Tatio (-22.35142, -68.01509), where we observed an adult **Puna Tinamou** with 10 little chicks along the road, we headed to the border with NW Argentina for our next adventure.



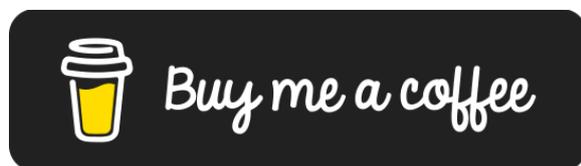
Geysers el Tatio



Geysers el Tatio

You made it! Thank you for reading 😊

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All observations made by us in Chile can be found on Observation.org. We observed a total of about 120 bird species and 11 mammal species in northern Chile. Click here for the: [total bird list](#), [total mammal list](#) or [the total species list](#).

Our Top 10	Birds	Mammals
1	James's Flamingo	Puna Pampas Cat / Colocolo
2	Chilean Woodstar	Marine Otter
3	Horned Coot	Northern Huemel/Taruca
4	Tamaruco Conebill	Bolivian Big-eared Mouse
5	Slender-billed Finch	Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk

## Purchasing Photos

If you like my pictures, you are in luck: they are for sale! For publication, presswork or just as artwork in your office or at home. A great memory of those great species you've seen during that trip! We donate 10% of our profits to WWF. My photos can be used for free for conservation or educational purposes after consultation. Have a look on my website and contact us via the website for the possibilities if you are interested: [www.robjansenphotography.com/shop](http://www.robjansenphotography.com/shop)



**Chilean Flamingo**



**Horned Coot**



**Giant Coot**



**Northern Silvery Grebe**



**Andean Gull**



**Andean Avocet**