

Watch the ostrich-like rhea stride across Patagonian plains



Hiking, diverse wildlife, awe-inspiring landscapes



October to March



As you travel along the road to Torres del Paine National Park, the landscape becomes increasingly wild and rugged; and even before you reach the park entrance, wildlife appears. A Darwin's (or lesser) rhea – one of the continent's largest birds, just behind its own close relative, the greater rhea – lopes along the undulating plain, its head bobbing and its wings spread, greyish-brown feathers bouncing with every step.

It's thrilling to see this massive bird running – or even just strolling – across the landscape, sometimes solitary, sometimes in pairs or small groups. But rheas aren't Torres del Paine's only avian attraction. Overhead, an Andean condor soars, its massive wingspan outlined against jagged mountain peaks. On the steppe below, more condors tear at the

remnants of some prey, dwarfing the crested caracaras (by no means small birds) also hoping for a taste.

A glorious living wilderness

Torres del Paine translates to 'towers of blue' in a blend of Spanish and the Indigenous Tehuelche language. The name refers to the three sheer granite pinnacles that rise up to 9462ft (2884m) from the Paine Massif alongside the equally spectacular Cuernos del Paine ('horns of Paine').

Beneath this dramatic backdrop are sapphire glacial lakes, wild cascading rivers, patches of woodland and vast plains covered with a mix of grasses and shrubland. Pumas roam here, though they are difficult to spot, as are the shy native huemul deer. Andean foxes are bolder, emerging from the brush to hunt



Right: Male rheas incubate many eggs from several females in a single nest

Below: A resilient rhea in Torres del Paine National Park



Q&A

What's special about birding here?

It's probably is the best place in the world to see condors. Torres del Paine also has one of the largest densities of rhea in Chile. They can reach almost 40mph (64km/h), so you have to have your camera ready.

What's the best time to visit?

The southern hemisphere spring is good because it's a time of breeding, but I also recommend visiting in winter for wildlife close encounters. You won't see as many species, but there's a welcome quiet, and the park is so spectacular – covered with snow.

Do you have a favourite bird?

My personal favourite is the torrent duck, which lives exclusively in whitewater rivers and can dive against very fast currents. It's an example of going against the flow for a good purpose.

Raffaele Di Biase, BirdsChile cofounder, director and guide





Left: The granite peaks of Torres del Paine

Right: Alpacas in Lauca National Park

Don't Miss

- Watching condors soaring up among the peaks
- Seeing flamingos take flight from an alpine lake
- Hiking alongside pure blue icebergs at Lago Grey

and scavenge, scamper across the landscape or loll by the roadside. Llama-like guanacos abound – grazing, sparring, mating, resting, always alert to predators.

And everywhere there are birds – over 100 species. Upland geese wade in the shallows of lakes, the females reddish-brown, the males mostly white. Austral parakeets – the world's southernmost parrots – perch in woodlands, bright green with red breasts and tailfeathers. In the salt lakes in the east, Chilean flamingos feed, occasionally spreading their wings in dramatic flight.

A conservation success story, with challenges

The Torres del Paine region was once the home of the nomadic Tehuelche people. Later, Chileans of European origin established sheep ranches in the area and began fencing off their territories. The national park was established in 1959 to preserve the magnificent landscapes and allow for the free movement of wildlife through a large variety of habitats.

But as the park's popularity has grown, Torres del Paine's fragile ecosystems have come under threat from human-caused erosion and forest fires. One accommodation that has made an effort to minimise its effect is EcoCamp Patagonia, where guests stay in geodesic domes built on wooden platforms. Nestled among shrubby trees on a hillside at the heart of the park, it's an ideal base for birdwatching, with many species commonly seen just steps from the domes.

Find Your Joy

Getting there

The park is 186 miles (300km) from the nearest airport in Punta Arenas, and 47 miles (76km) from

Puerto Natales, from where buses into the park take two to 4½ hours (destination depending). Park admission varies, depending on length of stay and nationality (Chilean or foreign); advance ticket purchase is required (via www.aspticket.cl).

Accessibility

Torres del Paine's terrain

is wild and rugged, but you can see spectacular views and wildlife when driving the park's roads; several overlooks and lake and lagoon shores are also accessible to those with limited mobility.

When to go

High season (December to early March) brings warm weather, green landscapes and abundant wildlife. Mid-

October to December sees an explosion of new life.

Further information

- Admission charge.
- Open year-round.
- No specialist facilities.
- The park has hotels, campsites and *refugios* (hikers' hostels), most offering food.
- www.parquetorresdelpaine.cl



Other Chilean Birding Hot-spots

Chiloé Island, Los Lagos

Just south of Chile's Lake District, Chiloé is a place of beauty and magic. Lush, green and often shrouded by mist, it's home to many birds, from forest and wetland species to shorebirds scurrying across sandy beaches and ibises perched on urban rooftops.

Don't miss

A boat tour of the islands in seabird-rich Puñihuil Bay, the only place in the world where Humboldt and Magellanic penguins nest side by side.

Lauca National Park, Arica y Parinacota

This stunning park in Chile's far north preserves a high-altitude landscape of snowcapped volcanoes, Altiplano (Andean plateau), lava fields and lakes. It's home to more than 140 bird species, as well as other wildlife, including guanaco, vicuña and viscacha (a rare rodent with rabbit-like ears).

Don't miss

The chance to spot all three of Chile's flamingo species – Chilean, James's and Andean – which often feed at lakes such as Lauca's Chungará.