

Southern Chile

Volcanoes & Monkey Puzzles

A Greentours Trip Report

30th November to 16th December 2024

Led by Oron Peri & Kurt Vickery



To Siete Tazas

Apart from a bit of delay getting our hire cars sorted out, getting out of Santiago was pretty much stress-free. After an hour or so into our transfer we stopped for lunch in one of the good quality motorway services and had the chance to make proper introductions. Chilean motorways are more or less like any other and so it was great to turn off towards Siete Tazas and into the countryside proper. The roadsides were really colourful but mainly of 'weeds' from other Mediterranean climes especially *Echium vulgare* and eye-burning orange *Eschscholzia* that we assumed were *E. californica*, though the flowers seemed a little smaller than the plant in commerce. However before too long we noticed a large population of native *Alstroemeria ligtu* ssp *ligtu* in a multitude of pink shades through to almost white. We spent quite a lot of time taking photographs before moving on a few miles and stopping for another colony - this time in

a very bright orange and red version - joined by the bright blue monocot, *Conanthera bifolia*. Birds were becoming much more obvious now – we had seen lots of Black and Turkey Vultures along the motorway but there were even more here. Commonly seen species along this road included Chilean Mocking-bird, Red-throated Meadowlark and Chimanga Caracara. With one of our many short stops to get better views we chanced upon a fine colony of the Alstroemeria relative, *Bomarea salsilla*, a tall scandent plant with deep magenta flowers and our first *Calceolaria* of the tour *C. ascendens*. A few miles further on we found another even better colony of *Alstroemeria ligtu* this time on a steep rocky slope. This site was now in the late afternoon shade showing off the colours to much better effect. On crags above them were a number of *Puya alpestris* in full flower, inaccessible here but whetting our appetite for things to come. Our next stop was for supplies at a surprisingly well stocked shop considering that we were now in the middle of nowhere. While waiting for Oron to stock up we enjoyed some very obliging Common Diuca-Finches with the male confidently singing his heart out at close quarters. Finally we reached the gated forest reserve at the Valle de las Cattas where we would be staying for the next couple of nights. Along the track we noticed the first Orchids of the trip in this case a colony of *Chloraea chrysanthus* a fine yellow/orange species that glowed out of the low-light conditions. Arriving at our lovely if simple lodges we walked across short turf absolutely covered in places with drifts of *Nierembergia repens* looking almost as if it had snowed with their beautiful white flowers packed so tightly together. Having got our luggage inside we made the most of the now rapidly fading light to explore nearby. Away from the lodges the grassland was distinctly marshy and the *Nierembergia* were replaced with a very attractive lilac-blue



member of the Rubiaceae – *Oldenlandia salzmannii* with more than a passing resemblance to our Field Madder back in Europe. Our last-minute birding was very productive too with a number of stunning California Quail, several noisy Southern Lapwings and ‘chacking’ Austral Thrushes along with a lonely Black-faced Ibis.

Siete Tazas National Park

We awoke to quite a frost on the short rabbit grazed turf, hard enough to blight the *Nierembergia* – we had obviously arrived with impeccable timing! Most of us were up with the lark to get in some birding and it proved very productive indeed. Chris and Davina flushed a Southern Crested Caracara as they opened their cabin door and the Southern Lapwings had come pretty close too. Austral Thrushes were everywhere as were Shiny Cowbirds but it was a flock of about twenty extremely garrulous Austral Parakeets that first grabbed our attention, their iridescent green feathers gleaming in the now very bright sunshine. Some very confiding Black-chinned Serins entertained and we managed to get some nice photographs. In the meantime Oron had produced some very tasty mushroom omelettes out of nowhere which were much appreciated along with coffees to take the chill away. Whilst enjoying breakfast we noticed that the many Chilean Swallows we had seen chasing about everywhere were in fact nesting under the corrugated roofing on the cabins and even more exciting a White-throated Tree Runner showed really well Tree Creeper style on a nearby *Nothofagus*. All this would have been a good day but we really hadn’t even started! Our first stop of the day was half or mile or so towards the exit through quite dense forest. In the deep shade we found several cryptically coloured *Gavilea glandulifera* in the low light and nearby more Orchids,



particularly numerous were *Chloraea chrysantha* but there were also a few *Chloraea volkmannii* and a single specimen of the stunning *Chloraea nudilabia*, a large and robust species which from a distance looks more like one of the shocking-orange South African *Gladiolus* than an orchid – at least in the mind of this co-leader. Other plants of note nearby were the curious green-flowered umbellifer *Azorella spinosa* and the unusual tiny Foxglove-purple flowered *Calceolaria arachnoidea* which was really worth looking at through a botanist's loupe. As we left the gated reserve we stopped almost immediately by the main road for a single flowering specimen of *Zephyranthes splendens* (formerly *Rhodophiala*). We were very lucky to see it as it was the only flower in a sea of otherwise blind plants. We then headed into the big town of Molina for supplies and a delicious lunch in an excellent restaurant recommended by the locals. On the way back we stopped to watch perhaps thirty Black-faced Ibis feeding amongst cattle and then yet another enormous colony of *Alstroemeria ligtu* this time joined by a few dozen dazzling blue *Pasithea caerulea* and a couple of *Schizanthus alpestris*. At the nearby crossing of the Rio Clara we added Black-hooded Siskin to the bird list. Our last stop of the day was at a very steep but accessible rocky slope for our first proper look at *Puya alpestris*. On our way up we chanced upon the slighter (relatively speaking of course) *Puya caerulea* with amazing bright metallic blue flowers. Arriving back at base there was a flock of about thirty Chilean Pigeons feeding in front of the cabins.

Parque Cerrado and road to Antuco

Whilst Oron was presenting the permits to the rangers at the entrance to the park we had a look around the forest edge and Kurt chanced upon a Chilean Flicker that gave us



all really good views for ten minutes or so. We also had a Cyan Lizard posing nicely on a tree trunk warming itself up in the first rays of morning sunshine. Then it was on to the first of the area's fine waterfalls. Our trail took us along the deep narrow ravine that follows the river and the famous series of spectacular falls. The forest here is mainly dominated by *Nothofagus glauca* and *N. dombeyi* with an understorey of *Citronella mucronata*. The ravine was so steep-sided that we were at times effectively in the forest

canopy - a very special experience. We stopped for a while at a viewpoint overlooking perhaps the most spectacular of the Siete Tazas cascades – The Bridal Veil falls. Next to the falls an immense sheer rockface was covered in *Puya alpestris* and below that several fine specimens of *Hydrangea serratifolia*. Eventually the track took us to more open and level habitats. The soil was surprisingly dry considering the luxuriant greenery of the trees. We began to find plants in leaf that looked very much like *Polygonatum* but when we found them in flower they proved to be another *Alstroemeria* species this time *A. revoluta* with much much finer leaves than the *A. ligtu* we had been seeing thus far. There were also lots of *Conanthera bifolia*. On the way back to the cars we found some enormous *Tarrantula*. Given previous reports we should have expected this, but they seemed so out of place in a habitat that very much resembles some of the evergreen *Quercus* forests back in Europe. We then started a pretty long transfer towards Antuco. After a couple of hours we made our way into one of the vast Pine plantations that so dominate the area. At first it seemed pretty unpromising but what a treasure we found here, namely the extraordinary Orchid *Chloraea crispa*, a stately white species apparently relishing the alien plantation habitat and behaving not unlike *Limodores* with spikes over three feet tall emerging leafless through the dense carpet of Pine needles. After half an hour we set off through seemingly endless tracts of Pine before stopping at a wide fire break that was absolutely covered in more *Chloraea crispa* in something more akin to its natural habitat – they were clearly doing very well but were much more modest in stature than the plants we had seen earlier. This semi-natural habitat was very sandy and created ideal conditions for the unusual cactus *Maihuenia poepigii* much to the delight of well-known cactus specialist Hazel. We also found a single specimen of the comparatively diminutive *Chloraea stenantha* and a couple of perfect hybrids with *C. crispa*. We then drove on, passing thousands and thousands *Chloraea crispa* stopping briefly for an attractive combination of orange *Quinchamalium chilense* and long pink-tubed *Fabiana imbricata* with carpets of *Montiopsis sericea* nearby too. As we progressed towards our final destination, the horizon became more and more filled with snow-capped volcanoes and, with not too far to go, we drove through a rugged valley with dramatic *Puya alpestris* everywhere that we resolved to revisit and enjoy in the coming few days. Eventually we arrived at our delightful eco-lodges with views to the beautiful volcano Antuco who's name translates to “where the sun and water meet”. Very exciting to think we would be botanising up there the very next day.

Laguna de Laja

We drove towards the national park stopping by a roadside area where seeps and underground streams were gushing through scree. Where the water was able to stabilise *Mimulus luteus* made a colourful display. On sheer cliffs above gigantic leaves of *Gunnera tinctoria* were impressive and *Cortaderia chilensis* too showing just how out of place they are in the larger gardens of Europe. We were drawn here to admire the plants but John had been scanning the roaring river behind us and was elated to find a

pair of Torrent Ducks with four chicks showing well. He had realised his main avian ambition for the tour but everybody else was delighted to see them too. A bit further up the road we stopped at a fascinating geological feature that appeared to be part of a huge collapsed vent creating an almost perfect horseshoe shape with edges of spectacular columnar jointing. Several small waterfalls created a dripping wet and moisture laden habitat providing perfect conditions for more *Gunnera* and *Mimulus*, joined here and there by large flowering bushes of *Fuchsia magellanica* and *Buddleja globosa*. From here the road became steeper and rockier before arriving in old volcanic lava fields. It was here that we were stopped in our tracks by the sight of some distant raptors that proved (when we managed to get our binoculars on them!) to be two Andean Condors. Eventually the landscape levelled in front of us as we approached the Laguna de Laja. Oron had pulled over so that we could get better views of a White-browed Ground-tyrant, oblivious of the fact we had pulled up next to a new Orchid for the trip, A fine specimen of *Gavilea littoralis*. Of course we all got out of the cars to admire it which inevitably led to more botanising nearby. We found the first *Viola* of the trip, namely *Viola cotyledon* (which was only just thinking of flowering) as well as a very neat compact Strawberry – *Fragaria chiloensis* with disproportionately large flowers as well as a lovely armoured Trefoil *Adesmia echinus* with spiny ‘chicken wire’ defences similar to the spines found on *Sarcopoterium* for example. Davina saw ‘something blue’ in amongst some distant boulders. We scrambled to investigate and found them to be large mats of the very showy pea – *Lathyrus multiceps*. Driving a little further we got our first view of the laguna and stopped at the base of a steep flowery slope. The colourful show was mainly comprised of *Calceolaria corymbosa* subsp. *floccosa*, *Senna arnottiana*, *Cerastium arvense*, more *Lathyrus multiceps* and the stunning burgundy coloured Vetch – *Vicia nigricans*. But at the top of the slope the real prize was *Chloraea alpina*. Most of them were a tiny bit past their best and - of course - the best ones were in the least safe situations. Those that made the steep trek up were rewarded with memorable photographs. Having made our way back down we found the fascinating *Nastanthus spathulatus*. As the flowers start to open properly, it looks like an almost perfect flat rosette of tenderstem broccoli with adpressed leaves arranged in a perfect circle around it. We had lunch in the shelter of some old mine buildings before getting onto the magnificent cinder slopes below the volcanic peak. This area is a pretty hostile environment but is in fact remarkably bio-diverse. Pockets of *Berberis empetrifolia* provide shelter and perfect growing conditions for delicate looking *Anemone multifida* and *Ephedra chilensis*. In the bare ash spiny mats of *Maihuenia poepigii* and *Euphorbia collina* dominate with scattered specimens of *Pozoa coriacea*. Higher up multi-coloured forms of *Viola cotyledon* are found in profusion with the highly prized rosulate species *Viola farkasiana* (a recently described species) in much more defined and discrete colonies – the latter probably the most desirable plant that we had seen today. After a wonderful couple of hours on the slope we made our way back down again stopping at a small dam on the river to get good views of Andean Gulls. We also got very

distant views of an Ashy-headed Goose that took quite a bit of time to identify looking through the heat haze. We had been concentrating so hard that we hadn't realised a smart pair of Crested Ducks were almost right under our noses the whole time! We still had a bit of time on our hands and so returned to the rugged valley full of *Puyas* that we had passed on the way a couple of days ago. This was a spectacular landscape full of stately *Puya alpestris* with the backgrounds full of bright blue sky and volcanoes. We found a new Orchid here – *Chloraea parviflora* and at another nearby crag a hybrid swarm that we THINK involved this species and *Chloraea barbata*.

To Villarrica

After four days of bright sunshine it was a bit of a surprise to wake up and see dense fog out of the window. Although today was mostly a transfer day we managed to get in quite a bit of botanising! About an hour into our journey we stopped just short of Los Angeles for a large colony of yellow Orchids that proved to be *Chloraea barbata* - further



searches revealed *Chloraea stenantha*, *C. crispera* and *C. gaviolu* along with some inevitable hybridisation. Alien weeds thrived in the disturbed ground next to the road including *Echium vulgare*, *Erodium cicutarium*, *Linum bienne*, *Briza maxima* and *Parentucellia viscosa* – puzzling that no native plants seem to take advantage of this niche. The next stint was rather longer before arriving at the outskirts of Villarrica. We stopped just before the town for a few tens of blooming *Alstroemeria aurea* with many many more buds yet to open. We also made a fortuitous wrong turn on the way to the hotel and found a few dozen *Chloraea virescens* in perfect

condition growing in the company of fine clumps of *Eryngium yuccifolium*.

Villarrica National Park

Villarrica is a prosperous lakeside town with a number of affluent leafy suburbs that feel a lot more Surrey than Southern hemisphere. Our lovely guesthouse was in such a situation with an immaculately tended garden with lawns and *Rhododendron* beds. Before breakfast we watched a lot of birds flitting about including White-crested Elaenia, Fire-eyed Diucon and House Wren. Austral Blackbirds serenaded us the whole time. We had noticed a number of Black-faced Ibis and Southern Lapwings circling above and were amazed to see them on the lawn as we went inside to eat. The Ibis spent a lot of times probing in the shrubberies! Our first sortie onto the Villarrica volcano took us up a winding track often lined with *Embothrium coccineum* laden with stunning red flowers unbroken for quite some distance. The track wasn't heading in the direction we had hoped but when turning around we got a really good view of a roosting Variable Hawk and lower down a Chilean Flicker showed well. We drove up another of the roads that access the mountain but had to turn back because the road had been rendered impassible by recent heavy rains. Not deterred we called in at the NP rangers' office and the very nice lady in charge suggested another road about twenty miles away. Finally we got to the lower slopes under the magnificent Volcan Lanin and were at last amongst the beginnings of the *Araucaria* forests that we had been longing to see. Before too long we were walking among the Monkey Puzzles and found some of the highly anticipated *Chloraea magellanica*, a justly prized species with staggeringly beautiful reticulate markings and nearby some *Gavilea littoralis* too. We walked through wonderful mixed forest following the course of a fast flowing stream where we found some superb intense red *Ourisia ruelloides* growing in the margins. Half a mile or so



further on we spotted the first of what would be hundreds of the dainty white Orchid – *Codonorchis lessonii*. In some places they grew alongside similar numbers of the yellow Violet - *Viola reichii*. Thorn-tailed Rayadito teased us with occasional fleeting glimpses. Returning we crossed the road to walk among some stately specimen *Araucaria* where we witnessed lots of Austral Parakeets feasting on the male cones,

tearing them apart and scattering the inedible bits all over the place! We moved on higher up the road and had lunch overlooking a beautiful mirror-calm lake before acting on the advice of the ranger and going right up to the Argentine border. We were so grateful for the tip as the *Araucaria* forests were vast and entirely untouched, with the most memorable backdrop of Volcan Lanin in the background.

Heurquehue National Park and to Puerto Varas

Today was another transfer day with just one scheduled stop around the environs of Heurquehue in the transition zone between the Lake District and the Valdivian rainforests of the south. We pulled up in the National Park entrance and followed a steep track that skirts a lake. In open situations *Libertia chilensis* lined the track with (and often in between) floriferous *Fuschia magellenica* and *Sophora macrocarpa* making quite a show. On steep moist banks the very large -flowered *Calceolaria crenulata* were abundant. We had planned to take the vehicles further into the forest but recent rains had made the roads barely passable and we decided better not to risk getting stuck. Instead we had seen a sign for a mirador on the way up and decided to give it a look. Very glad we did as the view was truly spectacular, overlooking three snow-capped volcanoes in a row. It was then on to our hotel in Puerto Varas. The hotel restaurant has a commanding view over the vast Lago Llanquihe. As we ate our meal the birders amongst us could see birds of many genera that would certainly be 'lifers' for some, so a pre-breakfast birding session was decided to be definitely the way to go.

Alerce Andino National Park

Our pre-breakfast walk along the lake shore produced lots of new birds. The Dark-bellied Cinchodes allowed close approach, one pair being constantly bothered for food by recently fledged chicks. A Little Egret in smart breeding plumage was having great success picking off fry at will. On some telegraph wires a Saffron Finch sang loudly and appeared to have more than one interested suitor. Lots of other birds were pecking amongst paving bricks with Patagonian Sierra-Finch, Chilean Mocking-bird, Rufous-tailed Plantcutter and Rufous-collared Sparrow amongst the many species we saw. After breakfast we drove south to Puerto Montt and stopped for some coastal birdwatching. On the seashore were many Kelp Gulls and Brown Hooded Gulls and while we were scanning them we picked up Whimbrel and American Oyster-catcher as well as a Silvery Grebe further out in the sea. A couple of Turkey Vultures circled above the whole time, sensing some kind of opportunity no doubt. We drove along the coast a little further and noticed a couple of Black-necked Swans but didn't really have time to stop for better views. The road turned inland and the vegetation grew increasingly lush as we approached the Valdivian forest (A very rare temperate rain-forest habitat unique to the southern end of South America). Arriving at the park we followed a path through some of the last preserved tracts of the rainforest. Large *Drimys winteri* were common here as were some magnificent flowering *Crinodendron hookerianum*. Soon we were

seeing some of the special plants of the reserve including red *Asteranthera ovata*, *Sarmienta scandens* and epiphytic *Luzuriaga polyphylla*, with pretty white flowers, clinging to moss-covered branches. Rather more elusive were the waxy trumpets of *Philesia magellanica*. Ferns are a real feature of the forest with *Blechnum chilense* and particularly the gigantic (sometimes six foot plus) fronds of *Lophosoria quadripinnata* dominating, the latter very much like stemless Tree-ferns. The track would eventually lead us past some dramatic thundering waterfalls to a locally famous 'Millenium tree' an Alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*) some 3000 years old. That was as far as we could go before making our way back. A most enjoyable day and very different to anything we had done thus far.

Road to Conguillo National Park

Our transfer took us back north again via the coastal Alerce forests. The first hour or two took us through rolling green countryside with a few random stops. First was for a colony of *Alstroemeria aurea* in various unusual shades of red for the species. A mile or two further on and the lead car got very close views of a Southern Crested Caracara. While we were waiting, the second got a simultaneous opportune view of a singing Long-tailed Meadowlark. We then drove through a huge area of giant *Eucalyptus* plantation before entering natural ancient forest once more. The tracks lined with *Libertia chilensis* gave an impression similar to that of Cow Parsley in English country lanes. Things immediately looked more promising and before long we stopped for some *Gavilea odoratissima* – A really showy large flowered species. While everybody was busy taking photographs Maggie had found a single *Gavilea longibracteata* which was no mean feat given that it was incredibly cryptic, flowering as it was amongst a sea of concolourous *Libertia* flowers. Nearby in cooler more shady parts, mossy banks were covered in the now very familiar *Codonorchis lessonii*, above which a couple of noisy Thorn-tailed Rayadito's gave away their presence with their apparently bad-tempered squabbling. We then had to tank down the motorway with just one more 'emergency' stop for a large colony of *Alstroemeria aurea*, this time the typical form but who could get bored of seeing it just one more time?!

Conguillo

About twenty miles before reaching the Park we noticed a number of Orchids in a strip of land by the road that was obviously regularly cleared of scrub. This was a large mixed population of *Chloraea virescens* and *Chloraea gaviu* with a lot of hybrids, none of which looked exactly the same. The site was slightly damp in places providing ideal habitat for the beautiful little Irid – *Herbertia lahue* that appeared to prefer to tuck itself deep inside grass tussocks. The roadsides themselves were covered in yet another fantastic combination of alien weeds this time Ox-eye daisies and the ubiquitous Viper's Bugloss. An hour or so later we could see the peak of Volcan Llama as we approached the park. Just before the park entrance evidence of the last major eruption

of 2009 was clear to see, the lava front sometimes reaching the road. A very stark scene, but already early colonisers were starting to do their work with *Gaultheria mucronata*, *Senecio chilensis*, *Fabiana imbricata* and silvery mats of *Rachometrium* moss very much leading the way. After showing permits it was just a few hundred yards until we were driving through some dense virgin forest that had escaped the ravages of the volcano. Here we found several tens of the curious monotypic *Arachnitis uniflora* erupting through the leaf litter. As the epithet suggests it does have rather spider-like flowers. The flowers are intricate and beautiful in their own way but rather small and very cryptic, especially in the low-light conditions, and so quite a bit of time was dedicated to try and get good photographs. A mile or so further on the landscape became truly breathtaking. On the horizon to our right on mountain ridges and crags were countless Monkey-puzzles, some of which were growing out of sheer cliffs and to our left the pure white peak of the volcano strongly contrasting with the jet-black of the recent lava flows with occasional green islands where somehow the lava had been diverted around parts of the *Nothofagus* forest. Our next stop was at the Lago Arco Iris (=Rainbow), pretty well named as the water was an extraordinary mixture of Azure, Jade and Turquoise in the blazing sunshine. The idyllic beauty spot had only just been spared by the volcano and partly filled with a bank of lava. From here we passed through a tract of colossal *Nothofagus dombeyi* followed by another amazing *Araucaria* forest with a lot of the trees festooned in lichens to further enhance their beauty. Eventually we reached the end of the road overlooking the high altitude Laguna Verde. Rather handily the interpretation centre up here serves Twining's English breakfast tea – a gift sent from heaven to this particular co-leader! John and Davina managed a quick spot of birding before we left, finding Andean Gull and a pair of Austral Negrita feeding on the shore.

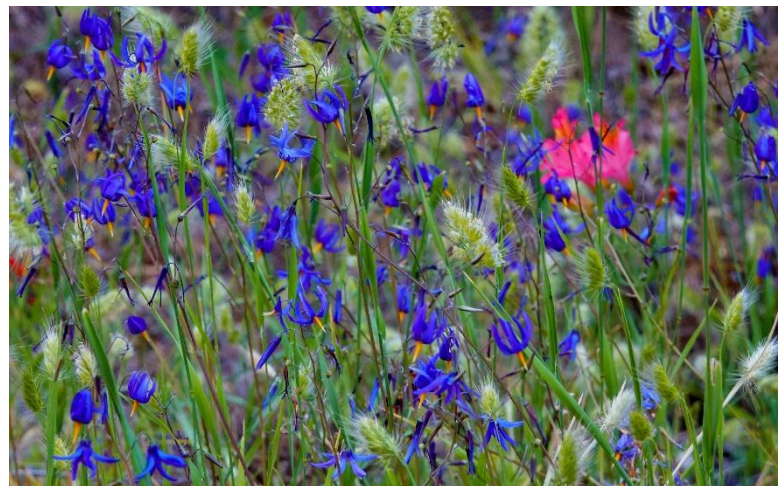
Nahuelbuta National Park



Our first stop on the way to the Park was at a roadside bank of coarse grasses for some yellow Orchids. These were *Chloraea barbata* with a few *Chloraea longipetala* as well. On a nearby hot crumbly bank were *Azorella trilobata* and *Conanthera bifolia* which we hadn't seen for the last few days. A bit further along another new beauty in the shape of *Gavilea araucana* caused a bit of excitement so much so that a long, if not particularly orderly, queue ensued to get at it! After this we thought we were on our way again when a similar thing happened - a colony of *Chloraea virescens* and *C. longipetala* was spotted along with some stunning intermediate hybrids. Oron was lucky

enough to photograph a Branded Skipper (*Hylephila fasciolata*) nectaring on one of the *Chloraea virescens*. Lunch was taken nearby in a charming little bus shelter where a couple of confiding Grass Wrens flitted about in the trees above us. You can always tell when you are approaching a National Park as the tarmac turns to dirt track, perhaps as a matter of principle? We had just entered such a zone when we saw lots of white *Lupinus microcarpus* and while taking a closer look found the pretty slender lilac - flowered Irid – *Solenomelus segethi* (formerly *Sisyrinchium*). In the Park itself we took quite a long walk through the dense *Nothofagus obliqua* forest. The forest floor was often carpeted with mauvy-pink *Oxalis arenaria* in the company of yet more *Codonorchis lessonii*. *Calceolaria corymbosa* were common on the trackside banks as were yet-to-flower *Mutisia ilicifolia*, the latter would surely put on a fantastic show in the weeks to come. One of our hoped-for targets, the parasitic shrub *Descumaria mutabilis*, took a bit of finding but luckily a good flowering specimen at head height suspended from a *Nothofagus* gave good opportunities to see it close-up. Just before we left we noticed a pair of Striped Woodpeckers above us. These beautifully marked birds had our attention for a good quarter of an hour. It was then the quite long last leg to Vilches. About two miles

before arriving we noticed some recently cleared banks absolutely covered in *Alstroemeria ligtu ssp simsii* and myriad *Conanthera bifolia*, an absolutely spectacular colour combination that only nature could possibly combine and get away with! As the daylight was rapidly fading we resolved to come back again the next day.



Reserva Altos de Lircay

It made a nice change for our day to start just a few miles up the road from our delightful eco-lodges. Entering the Reserve we followed a fairly steep track through dense medium-height *Nothofagus* forest, pretty much a 50/50 mix of *N. obliqua* and *N. macrocarpa* with scattered *Drimys winteri*. The track had a band each side of regularly cleared brash creating perfect conditions for the abundant *Fabiana imbricata* whose long narrow tubular flared flowers were regularly visited by a giant grey-blue Bee fly species. Occasionally we would see *Alstroemeria revoluta* again that we hadn't seen since the start of the tour but then we weren't a million miles away from our start as the crow flies. There were hundreds of leaves of *Zephyranthes splendens* (formerly *Rhodophiala*) but just one perfect scarlet flower - tantalisingly just inside some fencing

but thankfully photographs were just about possible with a long lens. Eventually the track levelled out and took us to a tract of lofty *Nothofagus dombeyi*. From here we took a circular route through virgin forest without the constraints of fencing. Yet another new orchid was found – *Chloraea campestris* as well as some very tall and slender *Chloraea chrysantha*, quite different in stature to those we had seen before but it had to be this species when we checked later. *Hydrangea serratifolia* were a real feature along the track before it led us to a mirador set in a rocky open situation. Here *Schizanthus hookeri* grew, one of the so-called ‘Poor Man’s Orchids’, a pretty mean handle for such a pretty and delicate beauty. Leaving the Reserve we returned the *Alstroemeria* and *Conanthera* site (as promised last night) and so glad we did – hundreds and hundreds of photographs were taken before having to drag ourselves back to the eco-lodge for dinner. It had been a wonderful day but was made even more special by watching the many stunning little Green-backed Firecrowns buzzing around the nectar-feeders placed around the grounds.

Laguna de Maule

Our day started with some good birding on the way to the National Park. Firstly on a reservoir where rafts of ducks included Spectacled Duck, Chiloe Wigeon and Speckled Teal. Then a real thrill to see thirty or so multi-coloured Burrowing Parrots making a real commotion in the top of small tree. As we arrived in the spectacular canyon that leads to the Laguna perhaps the real avian *pièce de résistance* had to be that of stunning views of magnificent Andean Condors that circled above us and occasionally came really close to check us out – an absolutely unforgettable experience. A mile or so higher up we stopped for a small colony of *Chloraea alpina* pushing through low growing *Berberis empetrifolia*. This was in a much more accessible place than those we had seen at Laguna de Laja meaning that everybody got to take photographs without vertigo kicking in. Our next stop was for a colony of *Oxalis adenophylla* that were in an exquisitely compact stage with their leaves only just emerging below the perfect rosette of flowers. On another slope nearby they were joined here and there by a few creamy-yellow *Olsynium frigidum* a gorgeous azure-blue pea, *Adesmia parviflora* and the rather less showy *Nassauvia parviflora*. We then drove on to an amazing colony of *Viola cotyledon* at their very peak of perfection in every shade of violet-blue through to pure white. Overlooking the great lake, lunch was taken in the shelter of some abandoned buildings, a welcome respite from the sometimes chilly wind and intense sunshine. Whilst eating our very nice packed lunches provided by the eco-lodge, Kurt and John noticed ‘something’ fly across the road in front of us. After a short scan we realised it was a Grey-throated Seedsnipe. Everybody was encouraged to come and have a look and it posed nicely for us for quite some time. We then moved on to a wet rock face surrounded by marshy flushes. The rock face was covered in fiery-orange *Mimulus cupreus* with *Calceolaria pritchardii* and *Calceolaria corymbosa*. In the flushes *Caltha sagittata* and the almost ‘all-lip’ *Calceolaria filicaulis* were pleasing additions. Moving

on we stopped for a huge colony of *Olsynium junceum* with a few *Armeria maritima* ssp *andina*. While we were here a Rufous-banded Miner kept us company walking about our feet and sometimes actually ON our feet! We made one more stop for another colony of *Oxalis adenophylla* before we reached the Argentine border and, with time not being on our side, we had to turn around. One last treat as we were showing documents at the checkpoint on the way home there were lots of colourful Patagonian Sierra Finches and a few Greater Yellowfinches looking for scraps in the tarmac.

Paso Vergara

Our final day in the field before the extension was through the stunning high Andean Paso Vergara. Our day started driving through the lush verdant steep side valley leading to the pass. Every so often a flock of Burrowing Parrots would fly alongside and over us. Our first stop was to watch a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, an extraordinary bird with a unique almost tailless silhouette that makes it look almost like a giant bat. Much to its chagrin but very entertaining for us it was being mobbed by a feisty American Kestrel before finally finding peace and roosting on a *Puya* flower-spike. We then drove a mile or so further, stopping to admire some *Cistanthe grandifolia* growing on cliff edges. Other plants of interest nearby were *Escallonia pulverulenta* and big clumps of the tall perennial Sunflower - *Aldama revoluta*. We also found some *Puya caerulea* that were easy to get at for a change. By a small stream fording the road we had good views of Austral Negrito. Higher up the valley broadened into a wide boulder-strewn habitat where we encountered fabulous *Alstroemeria ligtu* ssp *splendens*, a much stockier subspecies than the ones we had seen before, and in places the hillsides were painted bright yellow by shrubby *Calceolaria thyrsifolia*. It was a very striking combination where the two species met. From here we drove directly along the scenic road to a plateau until we reached the border post with Argentina. Here we found another couple of special plants, firstly, tumbling over rocks, golden *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* with wonderful contrasting glaucous leaves and a few *Schizanthus grahamii* – another ‘Poor Man’s Orchid’ in an unfeasible colour combination of shocking pink and orangey – yellow. Among the many birds we saw was a wonderful new addition – the gorgeous Mourning Sierra Finch. The males looked jet-black in the intense sunshine but occasionally a change of angle would show off a subtle mix of dark greys and blues in the feathers. We would have loved to stay much longer but we still had the long last leg to Santiago ahead of us before arriving at the comfortable Holiday Inn right inside the airport. It had been a very successful trip full of beautiful scenery, wonderful flowers and birds. Some of us sadly had to go home but the lucky ones still had the exciting extension to Torres del Paine to look forward to.