

Argentina – Valdes Peninsula

10 – 15 August 2026

Report by Paul McDougall

Tour participants Paul McDougall (photographic Guide) with 2 Touch the Wild clients

Summary

The Valdés Peninsula (Península Valdés) is one of Argentina's most remarkable natural treasures, located on the Atlantic coast of Chubut Province in Patagonia. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, the peninsula is internationally known for its extraordinary wildlife and its importance to the conservation of marine mammals. It stretches into the ocean between the Golfo San José and Golfo Nuevo, creating sheltered waters that provide ideal breeding and nursery grounds for many species.

The peninsula is especially famous for its population of southern right whales, which visit the area each year to mate and give birth. During the whale-watching season, visitors can observe these enormous mammals from boats or even from the shore. The region is also home to southern elephant seals, sea lions, Magellanic penguins, and numerous seabirds. One of the most fascinating sights is the local population of orcas, which have developed a unique hunting technique that involves intentionally beaching themselves to catch prey along the shoreline.

Beyond its wildlife, Valdés Peninsula is characterized by dramatic coastal scenery, including cliffs, bays, salt flats, and the windswept Patagonian steppe. Although the landscape may appear harsh and barren, it supports a surprising variety of plant and animal life adapted to the dry climate. The combination of rich marine ecosystems and rugged natural beauty makes the peninsula one of the most important ecological areas in South America.

Today, Valdés Peninsula attracts nature lovers, photographers, and scientists from around the world. Its protected status helps preserve fragile habitats while promoting sustainable tourism. As a sanctuary for some of the planet's most iconic marine species, the peninsula remains a symbol of Argentina's commitment to wildlife conservation and environmental stewardship.

Key Wildlife Species of Valdés Peninsula

Valdés Peninsula is one of the world's most important wildlife sanctuaries, particularly for marine mammals. Its key species include:

Southern Right Whale: The peninsula's sheltered bays serve as a major breeding and nursery area for this endangered species. It is considered one of the most important sites globally for southern right whale reproduction.

Southern Elephant Seal: Large breeding colonies of southern elephant seals inhabit the coastline. The peninsula hosts significant populations of this species and contains important breeding grounds.

Southern Sea Lion: Extensive sea lion colonies are found along the shores, making the area a critical habitat for the species.

Orcas (Killer Whales): The local orca population is famous for its unique hunting behavior, intentionally stranding on beaches to catch sea lion and elephant seal pups.

Magellanic Penguins: Large breeding colonies of Magellanic penguins can be found in and around the peninsula, making them one of the area's most recognizable bird species.

Guanacos, Maras, and Rheas: The inland Patagonian steppe supports these characteristic terrestrial animals, which are well adapted to the region's dry, windy environment.

Seabirds and Coastal Birds: The peninsula is home to a rich variety of birdlife, with numerous species of gulls, terns, cormorants, petrels, and other coastal birds inhabiting its wetlands, cliffs, and shores.

Together, these species make Valdés Peninsula one of South America's most important biodiversity hotspots and a premier destination for wildlife observation.

This was my first trip to Argentina. It was a location that I had wanted to add to my tour offering for a while and also somewhere. Although August is not the best time to visit this area as the main species are not here in high numbers until September, I decided it was worth having a look at the location for future trips.

My 2 clients on this trip were regular clients and the same 2 clients that did Brazil with me. It was a real pleasure to share the experience with them and also understand their thoughts on the trip and the location itself.

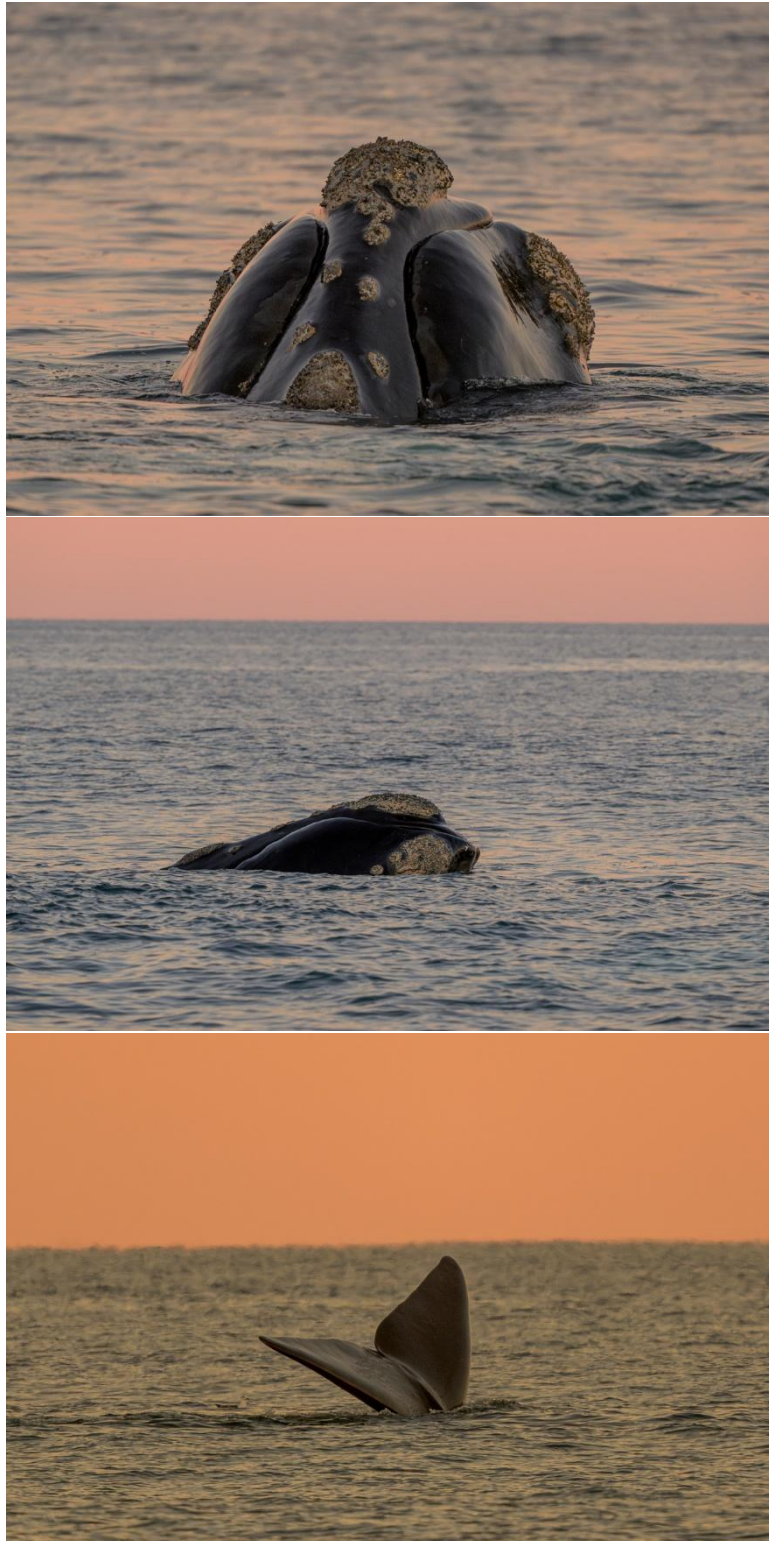
Day 1 Monday 10th August

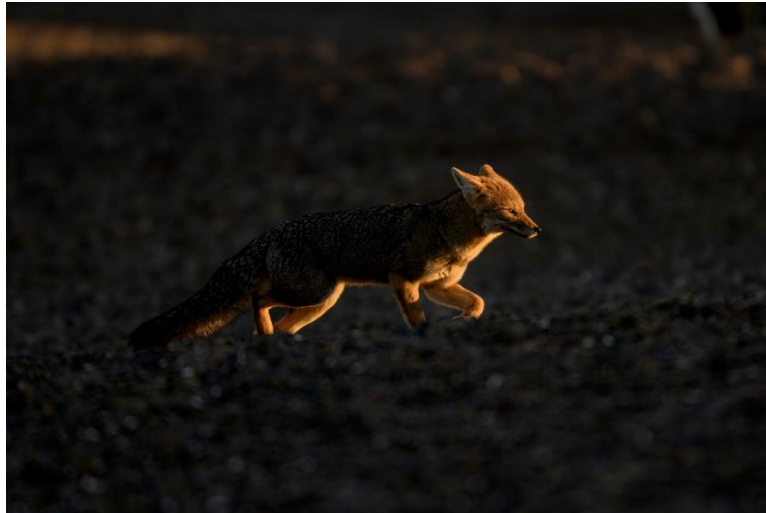
This was our scheduled arrival day and I arrived at 2am and my clients arrived on the next flight at 6am. We were transferred to the hotel and spent the day relaxing and catching up on sleep. We had all travelled from Brazil the previous day and were pleased to have a bit of down time before we started this trip. We were given the opportunity to go to a nearby beach and watch the whales at Sunset and so we decided to do this and left the hotel at 4:30pm to drive to the beach.

Southern right whales are the most iconic residents of Argentina's Valdés Peninsula and one of the main reasons the region is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Each year, these magnificent marine mammals gather in the calm, protected waters of Golfo Nuevo and Golfo San José, where they breed and care for their young. Valdés Peninsula is considered one of the world's most important breeding grounds for the species and has played a significant role in its recovery after historic population declines caused by commercial whaling. Visitors to the area often can observe mothers and calves swimming close to shore, making the peninsula one of the premier whale-watching destinations in the world.

We got to the beach and there were already quite a few vehicles in the car park but we parked and looked out to sea. There were whales everywhere. We walked down to the shore and sat and watched. There were huge whales less than 5 metres away from us swimming just off of the shore. There were some huge adult whales and some smaller younger whales. Sometimes the whales would surface and we would catch a glimpse of the massive heads, some whales were breaching on the horizon but were too far to photograph, sometimes we would see a fin and sometimes a tail, but this experience wasn't just about the images or the potential of images it was about the experience of just watching the sunset in the presence of these giant creatures. It was an amazing evening and one I will remember for a long time. Whilst on the beach we also saw a Grey Fox and a beautiful long tailed meadowlark.

After a brilliant few hours we returned to the hotel for our evening meal. We slept early as tomorrow we were going on a whale boat trip where we would hopefully get even closer to these amazing animals.





Day 2 Tuesday 11th August

We had breakfast at 7am and were picked up at 7:30am to drive to the Valdes Peninsula. The sunrise this morning was spectacular. We stopped at the gate to check permits and do the necessary formalities and then continued to the visitor centre. Here you could read about the area and the amazing wildlife that is found here, it was very interesting to see some of the wildlife we would hope to see on this trip. After using the toilets we continued.

We were driving towards the small town of Puerto Pirámides. This is where we would meet for our boat trip. We didn't really stop very much on the way. We saw the odd Guanaco but just continued to our destination. We checked in for the boat and boarded in good time. The boat holds 70 people but as we are not yet in high season the boat wasn't very full. So we had plenty of space to spread out and walk around the boat. As we started out to sea we saw whales breaching in the distance, I tried to take a few images but unfortunately they were too distant, we had some very close encounters throughout the trip with one whale even tail splashing only metres away, we also had one huge whale go right underneath the boat. As we were just about to reach the shore we saw a Magellanic Penguin. It was a juvenile bird and was lovely to see. The whole trip was over far too quickly and we were all very happy to have been treated to some wonderful views of these incredible animals.

After the whale trip we went to a cafe at Caleta Valdés for our lunch. The car park is usually an excellent place to see Hairy Armadillo but there were none around, but we did see some Cavy sheltering under a bush. We were able to take a few images of these and then after lunch we decided to take the South Road through the Peninsula. There had been some heavy rain a few days before we arrived and some of the roads were not in the best condition but we tried the South Road as the environment changed from Steppe to open grassland. We were hoping to see Mara and Rhea. A few miles in to the journey our guide spotted a skunk. The skunks on Peninsula Valdes are commonly found with an orangey colouration rather than the traditional black and white. Although distant we were able to take a few images. We then found some Rhea but again these were quite distant and disappeared quite quickly. Next we saw a pair of Burrowing Owls sat on a fence which were lovely to see and photograph. We ended the day at the sea lion colony near Puerto Pirámides and although distant and from above it was nice to see so many of these amazing animals. After the sea lions we started our drive back to Puerto Madryn. On our way back we saw some Guanaco herds and the light was lovely so we took some images of these including a few backlit images which was really nice. We arrived back at the hotel at around 7:30pm. We had dinner and then slept early.











Day 3 Wednesday 12th August

We had breakfast and this morning were picked up at 8am. We went back to the Peninsula and today we visited a private ranch which was purchased and used as a private research area. We were a little worried about the roads but the main purpose of the morning was to photograph Guanacos and to look for Mara and Hairy Armadillo.

The guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) is one of the most common and iconic land mammals of Argentina's Valdés Peninsula. A wild relative of the llama, the guanaco is well adapted to the peninsula's harsh Patagonian environment, where strong winds, limited rainfall, and sparse vegetation dominate the landscape. These graceful animals can often be seen grazing across the open steppe in small family groups, feeding on grasses and shrubs. Their keen eyesight and speed help them avoid predators, while their ability to survive in arid conditions makes them an important symbol of Patagonia's unique wildlife.

We started to see Guanaco immediately and we had some spectacular close views of them with some beautiful backgrounds. It was amazing to see and photograph this amazing animal. Surprisingly the roads were not as bad as we thought they would be and we were able to make it to the research centre at the bottom, after speaking to the ranger we spent some time looking around the grounds but still did not see any Hairy Armadillo. We had lunch here and then started our journey back. On the way back our guide spotted some Mara, another species that we hoped to see.

The Patagonian mara (*Dolichotis patagonum*) is a distinctive mammal that inhabits the open grasslands and shrublands of Valdés Peninsula. Often described as a cross between a rabbit and a small deer because of its long legs and large ears, the mara is one of the largest rodents in the world. It is well adapted to the dry, windswept environment of Patagonia, where it feeds primarily on grasses and other vegetation. Maras are known for their speed and agility, using powerful hind legs to escape predators across the peninsula's vast open landscapes.

As we were on a private ranch we were able to get out of the vehicle and get closer to the Mara, we were able to get a few images of this unique animal and then we continued on our way.

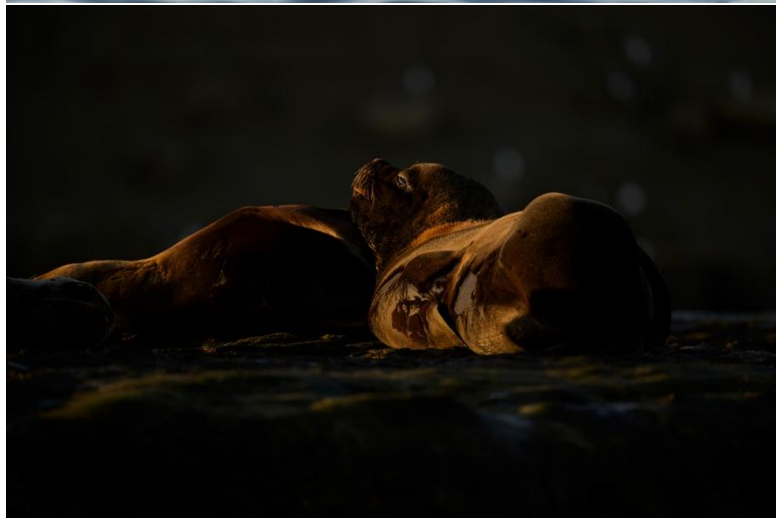
On our way we saw some more Mara by the road. So we photographed those and continued to Puerto Pirámides. We were doing a second boat trip for the sunset and evening light with the whales. We checked in and boarded the boat. There was a similar number of people on the boat and we positioned ourselves at the back of the boat to give ourselves an unobstructed view on both sides of the boat. We made our way in to a different bay, we had a few breaching whales as we travelled. Some of these were closer than yesterday so we were able to get a few better breaching images. We reached an area where there was a large group of whales we were told it was several males and a female. We watched them surface and interact together and then they were joined by a group of bottle-nosed dolphins. The Dolphins were interacting with the whales and at times it looked like the whales were chasing the dolphins away. After a while the dolphins started to breach and we were treated to a real show of these amazing animals jumping high out of the water. We spent most of our time here and it was such an incredible experience being so close to such amazing animals. We travelled back to shore but at a special request from our guide we sailed past the sea lion colony that we had photographed from the cliff tops last night. It was brilliant to be able to get eye level images of these amazing animals. We also saw Snowy Sheathbill and Dolphin Gulls. 2 amazing birds and both are on a lot of birders lists.

What a fantastic trip. We arrived back to shore as the sun was starting to set and it really was quite hard to process what we had all just seen and experienced. It really was amazing to be with these Gentle Giants for so long.

We travelled back to the hotel and were treated to another dramatic sunset. We arrived back at around 7:30pm. We had lunch and then went to sleep early.



















Day 4 Thursday 13th August

We had breakfast and this morning were picked up at 7:30am. Today we were heading to Rawson to go on a boat trip for the Commersons Dolphins.

The Commerson's dolphin (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*), locally known in Argentina as the tonina overa, is one of the most distinctive marine mammals found along the Patagonian coast. Easily recognized by its striking black-and-white coloration, this small dolphin inhabits the cold coastal waters of southern Argentina, including areas around Chubut Province and the Valdés Peninsula region. Commerson's dolphins are highly active and playful animals, often seen swimming near boats, riding waves, and performing acrobatic leaps above the water. They feed on fish, squid, and crustaceans and play an important role in the marine ecosystem.

These are incredibly distinctive animals, and we hoped to see them. This trip is usually very reliable but after the recent rain and winds we were prepared that we may not see them. We checked in and boarded the boat at 9:30am. We left the river and harbour and headed out to sea, we saw dolphins early, but these were bottle nosed dolphins not the dolphins we were hoping to see. We also saw a few whales the further out to sea that we went. But after searching for over an hour the Commerson's Dolphins had eluded us. Due to the tides we had to return so we did, as we entered the harbour we saw some sea lions that were sat on the shore and lounging on the bright orange fishing boats. This made for some interesting images and we stopped for a while to photograph them. After the dolphins we set off in search of flamingos. We

first visited a small lake in Trelew, we saw one juvenile flamingo. We then went to another area and despite the smell of sewerage we saw a group of around 30 flamingos, these were the adults and were the bright pink colour. We also saw Ibis, lapwing and Chimango Caracara. We spent some time here and took a few images. We then set off for our afternoon destination and Isla Escondida Beach. We were hoping to see Elephant Seals here and although we knew we were too early for the large males, we hoped that we might see a young male and a few females and juveniles. It would take a couple of hours to get there. On the way we stopped for lunch and watched and photographed a pair of Magellanic Horned Owl that were sat by the side of the road. We continued and reached the beach at around 2:30pm. We drove along the shore looking for seals. Our guide got out and scanned the shoreline and found a male Elephant seal. We drove a bit further and parked. We walked towards the seal and stopped a respectable distance away and took a few images to me this was a huge seal but I was told that adults when fully grown would be twice this size, I could not believe how large they are, we then continued to the end of the beach, We then spotted a group of Elephant Seals and another much bigger male. As we got out of the car we were approached by a Grey Fox which decided to stick around and pose for us for a while. We were able to photograph this lovely animal from a variety of different angles. It showed no fear and has obviously been fed in the past. We left the fox who actually decided to follow us as we walked towards the seals. We spent the next hour photographing the seals and got quite a few images of these amazing animals. The large male was particularly impressive and although large I was told could still grow at least another metre in length. Just as we were leaving we noticed 2 young males play fighting in the water so we crossed the beach to get a little closer, we photographed them for a while splashing around in the water. It was a great end to a fantastic day. We then left and started our journey back to Puerto Madryn. On the way we stopped for the owls and although there were now 3 the light was fading so we left and continued our journey. We arrived back at the hotel around 7:30pm and had dinner and slept early.

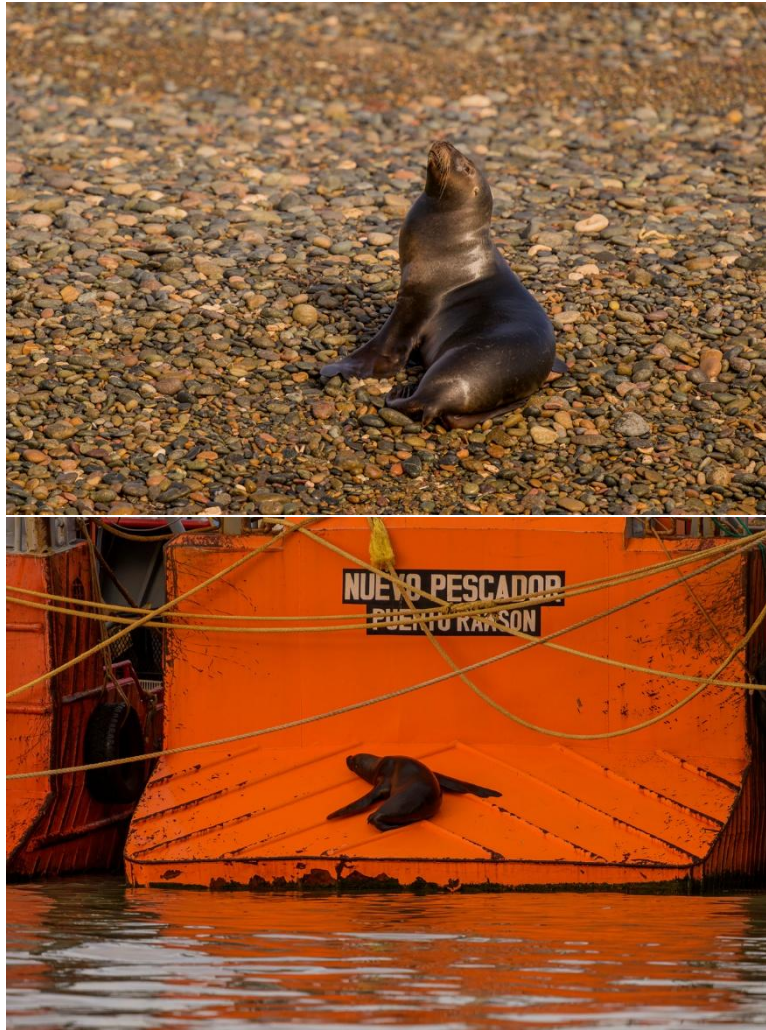












Day 5 Friday 14th August

We had breakfast and were picked up at 7:30am. Our first stop was the beach that we visited on the first night for the whales at sunset. This time we hoped to capture images of them at sunrise. We parked and made our way down to the beach. We sat and watched the whales.

Unfortunately this was the first morning where the sunrise was not dramatic. It was quite cloudy. This was the first morning we had like this. We stayed on the beach for around an hour and a half and captured a few images of the whales in front of the sun lighting the water. Today we were supposed to be going to a different location to look for Elephant Seals and Sea Lions but we had heard that the road was not very good so we decided to focus our last days efforts on finding a hairy armadillo. This was the only mammal that we were hoping to see that we hadn't yet. We first headed to Puerto Pirámides to pick up some lunch from a local café. We then headed towards Caleta Valdés. We took a slow drive along the Southern Road and that rewarded us with lots of Guanaco, more Mara and another skunk. We also saw burrowing owls and a small flock of Upland Geese. We had the excitement of an Armadillo run across the road in front of us but it disappeared very quickly before we really got to see it properly. We reached Caleta Valdés and sat and ate lunch in the car. We then explored the carpark and the surrounding area looking for armadillo. We had no luck at all. Our guide spoke to the rangers who suggested that we try Punta Norte. The only problem was that due to the roads this would be a 2 hour drive. We decided to go for this option and we made our way along the coast. We reached there at 3:30pm. On the way we saw some Turkey Vultures and lots of Guanaco and

some American Kestrels. We reached the car park and parked the car. This location is where the famous footage of Orcas hunting sea Lions has been shot, but we were well out of season for this and our focus was Hairy Armadillo. We went in to the visitor centre and then both of my clients went to use the toilets. I walked back over to one of the paths where we had seen some fresh digging which is usually a sign of the Hairy Armadillo. As I stood there and watched I caught a movement from my left. I looked around and there was a Hairy Armadillo. Wow!! It stopped and looked at me and I looked at it and then it made its way back to its burrow. I told my clients that I had seen one and that I thought that this was the best place to stay as we had the burrows so close. Over the next hour we saw several armadillos and they were running around looking for food. They were so quick and didn't stay still very often. As my clients were wanting to leave a bit earlier to get back to the hotel earlier so they could pack before a very early morning flight we decided we should start to drive back. Just as we were leaving our guide spotted an armadillo coming through the bushes close to the path. It stopped and looked at us and instead of turning around it kept coming and it sat and looked at us whilst sitting on top of a pile of sand surrounded by tree roots. It was an incredible sighting and just the type of image I had dreamed of getting. We then left and started the long 2 hour drive back to Puerto Madryn. We didn't see much on the way back but just as we were around 20 minutes from the hotel a huge flock of birds flew across the road and landed on the side. We caught a flash of colour as they flew and to our amazement it was a flock of Burrowing Parakeets. Despite wanting to get back early we all decided that we should stop and try and photograph these beautiful birds so we did. We got a few images before the entire flock flew off and moved to a different area to feed. We arrived back at the hotel at 7pm. We had one last meal together and then slept early. It was the last night of the trip and my clients were flying home the next morning. I had a free day in Argentina before I flew to Chile for my next trip









Argentina was a huge surprise for me. It was incredible. The diversity of wildlife was amazing and we were so fortunate to have the sightings that we had out of season. My future trips will all be held in September which is when the larger numbers of Elephant seals, Whales, Sea Lions, Penguins and Dolphin are in the area. I absolutely loved Argentina it is a wonderful country with very friendly people and some amazing wildlife.