

Petaca, a Chilean Beauty

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PATAGONIA, IN SOUTH CHILE, IS A magical place famous for its jagged peaks, vast grasslands, and howling winds. It is also home to one of our most adaptable land predators: the puma (also known as the mountain lion, cougar, panther, or catamount). Adult pumas are highly territorial and generally solitary, except during the breeding season or when a female cares for cubs.

During my recent visit to the Torres del Paine UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Patagonia, which is home to around 100 Pumas, an unusual circumstance occurred after my subject Petaca's seven-day dry spell of hunting. Petaca, watched over her cubs feeding at the carcass she'd just stolen. Afterwards, she allowed the young puma (who made the kill) to feed. During this episode, Petaca never stopped growling but stayed put. Eventually, Petaca left the carcass, signalled for her cubs to join, and moved off. We followed them far across a valley and into the hills. 🐾

A female puma of the Torres del Paine Biosphere Reserve in southern Chile





(Above) We had been watching a puma sleep for hours. She finally sniffed a nearby guanaco, at which point she got up, stretched, then took off down the mountain. This photo is a three-shot composite of her springing into action.

(Left) The Torres del Paine National Park in Chilean Patagonia is known for its famous granite towers, part of the Paine mountain range. It is one of the many breathtaking views into the national park. These towers are joined by the Cuernos del Paine, which are known as the 'Horns of Paine' and can be seen from a distance.





This lone guanaco is probably a young male recently driven from the herd. He'll need to find another herd soon. The guanaco warning system is so effective that pumas fail most of their hunts. The success rate is estimated 20%.



With the sun setting, Petaca's family settled down to rest



Petaca spotted this rock about the same time I did. All five photographers in my group wished hard for the same thing – a shot of Petaca atop the rock. It worked; what an incredible experience!