

CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM
VOLUNTEER TRIP TO TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK, PATAGONIA, CHILE
DECEMBER 2010

We, Richard and Chris Braunlich, co-leaders of the volunteer trip, met the five additional volunteers at the Hotel Diego de Almagro in Punta Arenas, Chile on the morning of Sunday, Dec. 5. Unfortunately we had learned the night before that family friends were trying to contact one volunteer about a family emergency, and we relayed this information to her as soon as we met her that morning. She soon determined that she needed to return home immediately, and so we helped her with arrangements and dropped her at the airport on our way north to Puerto Natales. After an overnight in Puerto Natales, we proceeded north to the Park, to Guarderia (ranger station) Grey, where CONAF (Chilean National Park Service) had arranged for our transport, with our tools, on the boat up Lago Grey to Refugio Grey, our first base camp.

The following morning, Tuesday, Dec. 7, Richard gave a presentation on tool use and safety, and we began work on the trails immediately adjacent to Refugio Grey and leading to the north towards Paso John Gardner. The six of us, working closely with the guardaparques (rangers) Hugo Mercado and Rubian Aguilar, patrolled approximately 2 miles (3 km) of this trail on Dec. 7, 8, and 10. Thursday, Dec. 9 was a “free” day, so that volunteers could rest and recover from the previous work. (“Patrolled” herein means that we generally improved the stated length of trail at least in a minor way, such as lopping encroaching foliage and some rock removal, and some sections of it in a major and labor-intensive way, as detailed in the following sections.) On the free day, Richard and Chris hiked south as far as the wide rocky arroyo, the end of the trail work of March 2007, observing the current state of that section of trail. On the way out, we noted the status of the construction of the new Refugio Grey, which will be located roughly ¼ mile south of the junction where the present trail turnoff to Refugio Grey leaves the main north-south trail. (So far, the locations of the buildings have only been staked out, but there is a permanent steel rail-and-winch structure in place to deliver supplies up from the lake.)

Work on the above trail included:

- We closed off an egregious shortcut at rock wall switchback built in Mar 2007.



Before



After closing shortcut

- We improved a shortcut “use” trail 120 yards long to make it a link in the principal trail system, including scarifying, planting, and covering 16 yds. of low trail and replacing it with a new higher section.
- We closed off 1 shortcut trail to the mirador (vista point).
- We closed and covered 5 shortcut trails totaling 150 yds.
- We built a new section of trail, 86 yds long, to bypass a wet area; closed and covered the ends of old section.

- We uncovered a pasarela (boardwalk type of bridge) buried in a rocky arroyo with water flowing over it, and cleaned the rocky debris out from under it to provide a clear and deep channel. (The photo to the right shows the pasarela after the top had been cleared off and water was no longer flowing over it.)



- We widened and improved (rock removal, raised profile, X-section correction) approx 60 yds of trail and added 6 rock steps, 4 water bars, and 2 side drains.



Trail crossing large tree roots



Stepping stones between roots

- We fitted rocks between large roots at base of tree to ease crossing by hikers.
- We removed many rocks and lopped encroaching foliage over the length of the trail.
- We built a rock wall approx 3 ft high and 6 ft long to widen trail and raise it above large tree roots at a constricted section.



Before repair



After repair

On Saturday, Dec. 11, the group and its tools were transported by boat back down Lago Grey, and by CONAF van to administration HQ, where the group was treated to coffee and snack, while Chris made arrangements to get one of the volunteers to the hospital in Puerto Natales for diagnosis and treatment of a medical problem. (see separate incident report.) Richard and the rest of the group, with the tools, proceeded on to Pudeto where we rode the catamaran across Lago Pehoe to Refugio Paine Grande, our second and final base camp, while Chris and the ill volunteer went down to Puerto Natales a few hours later in a CONAF van.

Sunday, Dec. 12, the four of us remaining (Chris and the ill volunteer still in Natales, Hugo had completed his assignment to us, Rubian had been called off for S.A.R.) began work on the trail starting from Guarderia Pehoe heading northwest toward Refugio Grey. That evening Chris and the ill volunteer returned from Puerto Natales, after the doctor had prescribed medicines for his medical problems, and told him to rest. The next day, with Rubian returned, and Chris and Richard prohibiting the ill volunteer from working, the smaller group continued working on the same trail, patrolling approximately 2 ½ miles over that 2-day period. For a few hours during the afternoon of the second day, we also had help from guardaparque Carlos Berrueta and two brigadistas (wildfire fighters).



Work on this section of trail included:

- Installed 8 rock steps and a water bar at a particularly steep section, with a second water bar about 75 ft above the steep section.
- Scarified, replanted, and covered a deeply rutted 5 yd section, and improved the much better hiker's bypass around it; built a water bar and outlet channel at the lower end.
- Closed and partly covered 40± yds of parallel trail; built a 5 yd long drainage channel for the low area of the main trail, installed a large flat rock at the lowest point, and built 2 water bars.
- Built a puddle drain, and installed a large flat rock in the center of the puddle.
- Closed and covered 3 additional sections of parallel trails totaling 67 yds.
- Closed off and covered multiple trails in a high rocky area where the main trail was obscure; used rocks extensively to demarcate the proper main trail.
- Removed many dozens of rocks and lopped encroaching foliage over the length of the trail.

Tuesday Dec. 14 was the second rest day for the volunteers. Richard and Chris inspected the trail from Guarderia Pehoe to Italian Camp, roughly half of which had been upgraded to varying degrees in March 2008. We also inspected the Italian Camp suspension bridge, which seemed in not much worse shape than when we did a bridge site survey in April 2008.

Wednesday and Thursday, Dec. 15 and 16, the formerly ill volunteer rejoined the group, and the full group patrolled approximately 2 ½ miles of the trail starting from Guarderia Pehoe and heading northeast toward Italian Camp, which had been worked on by our much-larger group in March 2008. Rubian left mid-morning Wednesday for assignment elsewhere, but Carlos worked with us both days, and four brigadistas from mid-afternoon Wednesday through Thursday.

Details of work on the above trail:

- Removed many rocks from the section of trail closest to the refugio, which had not been worked on in 2008, and filled holes with gravel hauled from beach.
- Widened existing trail at 2 sites (116 yds and 22 yds long) and used the resulting sod plugs to place in the scarified parallel tracks, which were then covered and closed at the ends; hauled beach gravel to widened sections.
- Built 3 water bars and 3 puddle drains.
- Covered approx 25 yds of muddy trail with beach gravel.
- At the beginning of new section of trail built to skirt a meadow in March 2008, we more completely closed off trail down into meadow (old trail is still used by horses, but little evidence hikers are using it.)



- Scarified, plugged with sod (1st shortcut only), closed off, and covered 2 shortcuts on the new section of trail, the first at the contouring hairpin curve, the second across a small piece of the meadow at the end. As a general comment, we found that in areas where

we had aggressively closed off shortcuts in prior years with dead branches and rocks as well as plugs of vegetation, the shortcuts remained closed. Where the closures had been milder (and more attractive at the outset), hikers had renewed their use of the shortcuts.

- Fixed a major water bar (i.e., one diverting a flowing stream off the trail) which had been constructed in March 2008, but which was no longer functioning.
- Removed many dozens of rocks and lopped encroaching foliage over the length of the trail.

Friday Dec. 17 the group left Refugio Paine Grande for an overnight stay in Pto. Natales, and the next day, Dec. 18, two volunteers were dropped at the airport in Pta. Arenas, one volunteer was dropped at a hotel in the city of Pta. Arenas, and the remaining volunteer headed out from Pto. Natales to El Calafate, Argentina, by public bus.

Summary Statistics: In summary, our group patrolled approximately 7 miles (11 KM) of trail. The total volunteer hours worked was 273 person hours. The Park rangers and brigadistas who assisted us added another 104 person hours of work.

Tools available for Trail Maintenance: The Park transported trail maintenance tools adequate for our small group to our first base of operations, and then moved that same group of tools to our second base of operations. When we left, these tools were stored at the Guarderia near Paine Grande Refugio. The tools we worked with were functional, but clearly worn and will need to be upgraded at some time in the near future. Because we were a small group, the tools available were only a small subset of the tools which were provided by, and available to, Conservation VIP for its prior trail work in the park. We were not able to determine the location of the remaining tools.

The Park's assistance was terrific: During our entire stay in Torres del Paine National Park, the Park personnel were very supportive and appreciative of the work done by the volunteers. As mentioned above, the Park personnel worked with us throughout our trip. The Park provided significant assistance with our movements within the Park, and assisted in delivering the ill volunteer to Puerto Natales for medical care. Early in our trip, the Park Superintendent hiked out to our work site to personally thank us for our work. On our final day in the Park, they hosted a special lunch for the volunteers at the Park headquarters dining room, and they presented each volunteer with a certificate of appreciation, a commemorative medal from the Park's recent 50th anniversary celebration, and two beautiful posters illustrating the flora and fauna of the Park. It was a pleasure and an honor to be able to provide assistance to this beautiful Park.

Our volunteers: We believe that, in a short period of time, our group accomplished a great deal of work which will significantly improve the hiking experience of visitors to the Park. In fact, as we worked, many hikers stopped to ask about our work and to thank us for improving the trails. All of this was accomplished because of the hard work of our volunteers. As we mentioned above, we were a small group, but every one of our volunteers was hard-working and a big contributor. We are very grateful to all of them.



Richard and Chris Braunlich