

# The Alerce Trail

Have you ever wondered how those beautiful close-up shots of endangered flora and fauna are taken? Here's **Vince Manna's** firsthand account and images of his visit to *Alerce Andino Park*, Chile, in search of a 4,000 year old ancient alerce tree.



**V**ery few foreigners have ever seen an alerce, and only an estimated one in 10,000 Chileans has ever seen a live specimen\*,' was a statement I recently read on the internet when researching the subject of this now endangered tree species. I can now say that I am one of the few.

I have made several overseas trips over the last few years to visit and photograph animals and natural landscapes. Last year I went to South America for the start of an eight month journey that took me to Venezuela, Suriname, French Guyana and Argentina. As a furniture and cabinetmaker I've had the opportunity to obtain a considerable amount of alerce over the last 30

years, and since then it has become highly protected. One aim of my trip was to obtain images of alerce trees in their natural setting.

Covering 40,000 hectares, Alerce Andino Park in Chile contains some of the last few remaining stands of ancient alerce trees with one specimen reputed to be 4,000 years old. These stands are in remote areas, accessible only via steep trails through dense forest.

It was a cold and misty morning when I arrived by bus into the village of Correntoso. I struggled in the light rain with my heavy equipment, walking down a dirt track passing a few old wooden homes, all made from alerce, weathered and grey. It was post-card scenery with smoke rising from old tilted homes set against a pristine forested mountain backdrop covered in ever changing cloud formations.

A local family offered to put me up and after settling in I went to the park ranger's office to inquire about the location of the 4,000 year old alerce and was told about the distance and risks involved. It was an estimated six hour trek. With heavy rain forecast there was a chance the Rio (river) Chaicos would flood and I would be stranded, in which case I would need camping gear to survive the wet and freezing cold. Bearing in mind the steepness of the track and the likelihood of river crossings, I didn't want to risk carrying the extra weight of camping gear as my camera gear and basic essentials already came to over 25 kilos. I was also informed that there were occasional puma sightings!

The following day it was still raining but I decided to go on to the next park ranger's office some 12km away and make up my mind whether to continue. I stopped to photograph rivers and rock formations along the way, and numerous old shacks that all seemed deserted. I arrived at the park office at the foot of the mountains and paid to stay overnight in an old house before setting out the next day. The earlier warnings were repeated. Several days of heavy rain were forecast, however, the ranger explained, there was another stand of alerces before the Rio Chaicas, four to five hours away. There I would be able to see many large trees approximately 2,500 to 3,000 years old, should I not reach the giant tree.

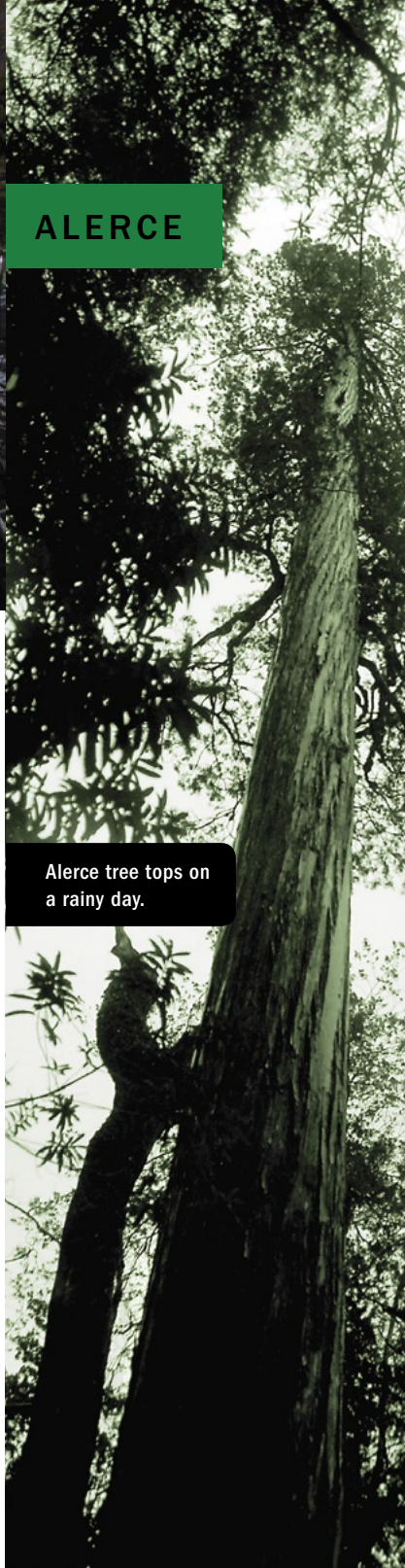
I spent an uncomfortable night in the large empty house that was filled with dust and cobwebs. I was wet, cold and hungry, and had difficulty in starting a fire with the wet (alerce!) firewood. I was considering giving the track a miss, but I thought it could be years before I came back to this place again so it

Stair trails like waterfalls at Rodal Alerce Park.

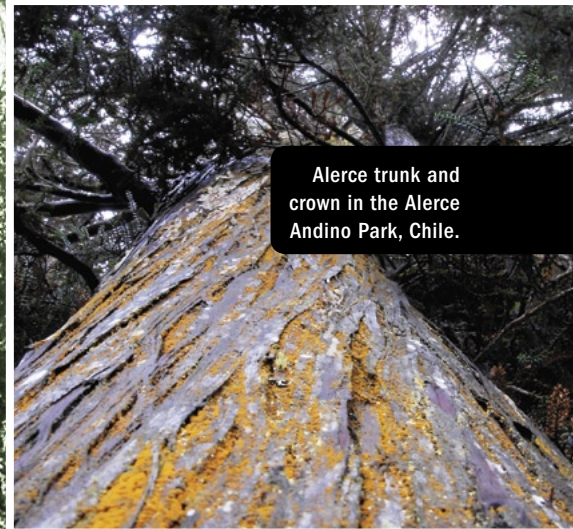




## ALERCE



Alerce tree tops on a rainy day.



Alerce trunk and crown in the Alerce Andino Park, Chile.



was now or never. I made a bed from old blankets and moved a bed across the door should there be an unwelcome visitor. Later I heard wild dogs outside and saw them peering through the windows at the candle light. During the night I heard creaking floorboards and knew my mind was playing tricks on me.

At 6am the next morning it was still pitch black as I packed only the bare essentials, my camera gear and four chocolate bars. The tripod and large 500mm lens alone weighed 6kg. Outside, the daylight revealed what was to be a wet and miserable day. The rain would not make it easy to take photos, however I liked the idea of capturing wet forest images so there I was, on my way.

Only half a kilometre or so up the narrow path with little daylight entering the forest, it hit me that this was not going to be fun at all, in fact it would be a test of courage to see just how far I would go. The reality also hit me that I was alone. Seeing the flooded, slippery and muddy paths reminded me that there was a considerable amount of risk should I lose my way

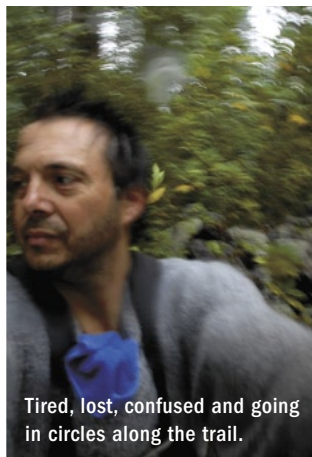
Alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*), also known as 'redwood of the Andes', is a large conifer found mainly from 400 to 750 metres above sea level. Related to the cypress it may grow up to 70 metres in height and 4 metres in diameter. It grows slowly, only 10mm in thickness in up to 20 years. With living specimens of over 3,600 years it rates in longevity with California's redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and bristlecone pine (*Pinus longaeva*), Australia's Huon pine and another South American species, *Araucaria araucana* or monkey puzzle tree.

Only an estimated 15% of the world's alerce forest remains. In 1976 Chile declared the tree a 'national monument', and it is listed on CITES as an endangered species. Although Chile proscribes the export of alerce, domestic use is permitted and illegal logging is still carried out.

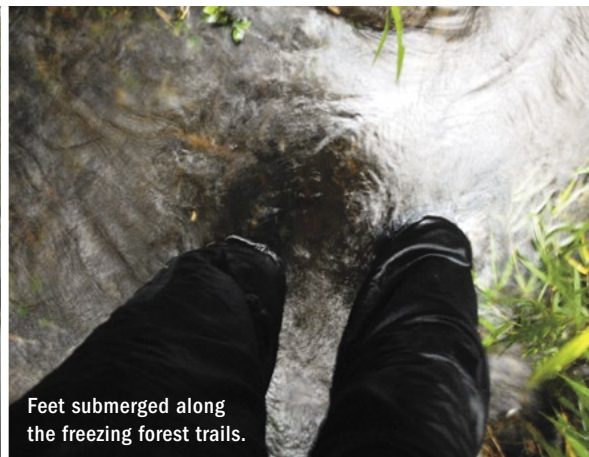
Alerce dries well with little degrade. It is lightweight and low-density and machines easily due to its straight grain. With a high resin content it has a reputation for durability and was formerly widely used for boat building, cooperage, house shingles and furniture.



Old deserted alerce home set in the mountain ranges.



Tired, lost, confused and going in circles along the trail.



Feet submerged along the freezing forest trails.

and/or become injured. I also had other concerns. I have previously encountered jaguars and tapirs in the jungles of Amazonia and the Brazilian Pantanal, however jaguars usually run away from people. Pumas are more aggressive and can creep up from behind, a daunting thought.

I now found there was less risk of slipping by walking through the icy puddles on the forest floor, than crawling over moss covered rocks or under large fallen trees, of which there were many. By this stage I was fully soaked through. I brought the tripod to capture quality exposures, however if I paused to use it my camera was more exposed to the continuous rain. I took out and used a little hand towel after the lens cleaners were completely drenched.

The wet forest was an impressive but scary sight and the only sound I could hear was that of running water in nearby creeks and waterfalls—I didn't see a single animal. There were countless photographic opportunities: twisted branches, thick green ferns and fungi lining the track that reminded me that it was quite some time since someone last walked along this trail. A pattern developed: I would stop, photograph, then dry the camera with the hand towel that now looked and felt more like a wet sponge as I wringed it out.

The track became even steeper and more slippery, sometimes 45° up and then 60° down muddy steps. Walking down was more dangerous than up and the whole time I had to pretend there wasn't 25kg on my back. I slipped and slid and my feet were constantly submerged in freezing water, sometimes up to a foot in depth, but I kept up a hard pace to try and stay warm.

The water ran like waterfalls over the rotting stair treads that lined the trails but I walked right through it holding on to the rickety handrails. I was now aware that the river would be high, and I would be unable to cross it. I was already a long way from the village, and the tracks were not clearly marked as I was led to believe. Mostly I had to guess as to which direction I to take. I broke thin branches and leaves to mark my return—the hints from the movies I watch at times come in handy. I encouraged myself to continue on, a little further wouldn't make much difference I thought to myself, going deeper each time. In some areas the tracks led me in circles, I had to guess the way and took risks changing paths in order to move on.

Finally I saw a lake in the distance and 15 more minutes of slippery treads and a long muddy path finally led to the Rio Chaicas. I had now walked over five hours of steep difficult trails. There was a thunderous roar—the force of a river running down a mountain at 30° over rocks and fallen trees was incredible and I could see why I was warned. It was as wide as a main road and at high altitude the waters were freezing cold.

The sight of the river was impressive but also disappointing, as I now realised it would be impossible to reach the ancient alerce tree, and to get back I had to repeat an extreme effort. It only occurred to me then that to capture images of this remotely located force of nature was as impressive and unique as the tree itself. I took as many images as I could in as little time possible.

Now I was starting to feel cold and had only about four hours to return. Wet and shivering I finally started making

my way back as quickly as possible. I stopped photographing, that is until I came across another interesting subject, so it was to be, stop and start for several hours. The water rushing over the stair treads grew to massive proportions—all I could do was keep walking right through it. Nighttime was getting closer—I kept calm by thinking of my photographic accomplishment and the stories I could tell around the dinner table to my friends back at home!

Eventually I reached the alerce trees I had passed earlier and stopped to take more photos—they weren't the 4,000 year old kind I had hoped for, but impressive none-the-less. Water falling from the trees did not allow proper photographic opportunities.

Finally, I could see the paths I had left early in the morning and sensed an end to a near nightmare. Reaching the old house I stripped off into a snowjacket I had left there, and, barefooted, set about lighting a fire. Eventually smoke and a little warmth came about. I laid all my things onto the timber floors to dry out overnight and retired some hours later. The following day the family I had stayed with in the village were concerned about me and sent the park ranger to find out if I had returned. They sent hot coffee, fruit and chocolate. I was touched by their warmth and consideration. I was thrilled with my achievement and happy with the river and forest images I had taken.

Photos: Vince Manna

\* [www.american.edu/TED/chile.htm](http://www.american.edu/TED/chile.htm)

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