

## Volunteer Trip Report Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia March 16 – 26, 2026



*Figure 1: March 17 – ConservationVIP March 2026 Volunteer Group Photo at Mirador Grey*

### Torres del Paine March 2026 Volunteer Trip Report Summary of Accomplishments

In March 2026, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) traveled once again to Torres del Paine National Park in Chilean Patagonia, to contribute to ongoing trail maintenance and conservation efforts within the park. ConservationVIP has long partnered with the park and local agencies to construct and maintain trails, including sections of the “W” and “O” trekking circuits. With more than 350,000 visitors per year and as many as 1,000 hikers per day on popular trails during peak season, maintaining trails in this special place is important to ensure long-term sustainability of the trails and protection of the environment.

On this trip, the ConservationVIP group focused on maintaining trails along portions of the trails northeastward from Refugio Paine Grande towards Campamento Italiano (“Italian Camp”). Using shovels, pickaxes, pick Mattocks, Pulaskis, McLeods, hoes, and loppers, the group enhanced water drainage and removed obstacles such as rocks and brush. They also reduced trail braiding which had developed in sections with high foot traffic and where people hiked off the main trail because it was too wet. Additional

maintenance included revegetating lightly worn sections of social trails that could still be recovered. In addition to these trail improvements, the group collaborated with one of our local partners, Torres del Paine Fundación Legacy (Legacy Fund), to collect seeds from native plants which will support ongoing ecological restoration efforts.

In March 2026, the ConservationVIP group successfully completed 355 volunteer hours, improving and maintaining approximately 1.5 miles of trail and collecting approximately 16 quarts of seeds from 10 native plant species.

While in the Park, the ConservationVIP® group stayed at Refugio Paine Grande (Paine Grande), sharing six-person bunk rooms. The refugio provided cafeteria-style hot breakfast and dinner service, with bagged lunches for the trail each day. Situated at one of the main entry/egress points for popular treks, Paine Grande was filled with new travelers each day – a true melting pot of explorers from around the globe.



*Figure 2: View of the park upon arrival by catamaran near Paine Grande*



*Figure 3: View of Torres del Paine massif from approach by transport van*

## Detailed Trip Report

### Monday, March 16

In the afternoon, ConservationVIP® travelers gathered together with two Trip Leaders, Danielle and Eamon, at Hotel Natalino in Puerto Natales, Chile. The welcome meeting included introductions, an overview of the next ten days, review of trip priorities (safety, enjoyment and project accomplishment), and more. After the briefing, the group enjoyed a short walk to a local restaurant, Kau Café, where they were treated to a celebratory drink on the house and a beautifully crafted, locally sourced three-course meal. Kau Café was the perfect place for the group's first evening together, celebrating a successful arrival journey for all, and shared excitement for the trip ahead.



*Figure 4: Group Dinner at Kau Café*

- *Special thanks to Kau Café for offering a discount to the group in support of ConservationVIP®'s commitment to Torres del Paine! Support from local partners like Kau goes a long way in helping ConservationVIP® achieve their mission.*

### Tuesday, March 17

After an early breakfast, the group departed by private transport van towards Lago Grey. As the sun began to brighten the sky, the first glimpse of the park's majestic massif could be seen. A quick stop at Mirador Grey offered the opportunity for a group photo (*Figure 1*) and the group had its first experience of the notorious "Patagonian wind".



Transport continued to Lago Grey where the group enjoyed a short hike through forested trail and across a sand bar (*Figure 6*) before boarding a catamaran for navigation across the lake and up-close viewing of Grey Glacier (*Figure 7*). While winds were fierce, weather cooperated enough that the boat was able to pass in front of all three faces of the ice-blue glacier. On the excursion, those who wished to partake were treated to their first Calafate Sour, which is a regional specialty! At the end of the catamaran excursion, the group disembarked and followed the trail back to the starting point for buffet lunch at Rio Pingo. After lunch, the group departed by the same van towards Pudeto.

*Figure 5: ConservationVIP travelers on Lago Grey catamaran*

At Pudeto, the travelers helped each other to move belongings, gear and tools from the van to a second catamaran. This catamaran would be the final leg of a day-long journey to reach “home” for the next eight nights.

Catamaran Lago Pehoé is the primary means of accessing Paine Grande, one of three primary entry points for the most popular trails in the park. Upon docking (**Figure 2**), the group collected all belongings, gear and tools and walked a short distance to the refugio. The group lodging was in two six-bunk rooms. Six people were in one room, and three were in another. Those three shared their six-bunk room with other travelers throughout the duration of the stay. After settling in, the group reconvened for their first dinner together at the refugio’s cafeteria. Following dinner, the Trip Leaders gave an overview of the plan for the following day. This is night one at Paine Grande!

- *Fun fact: Similar in look and taste to a blueberry, Calafate berries come from a thorny shrub, prolific throughout southern Chile. A staple in Patagonian cuisine, Calafate is often found in desserts, jams, candies, liqueurs, and in the beloved Calafate Sour. As legend has it, consuming Calafate ensures your return to Patagonia!*



**Figure 6** (Top Left): View along the sand bar walk with Lago Grey behind

**Figure 7** (Top Right): Gray Glacier – one of three visible faces

**Figure 8** (Lower Left): ConservationVIP travelers on catamaran deck with Grey Glacier behind

**Figure 9** (Lower Right): ConservationVIP travelers on catamaran to Paine Grande

### **Wednesday, March 18**

A stunningly beautiful sunrise greeted the group, welcoming ConservationVIP® travelers to their first day volunteering in Torres del Paine National Park (**Figure 10**). After breakfast, the group was joined by Pablo Sanhuesa from Legacy Fund. A Forestry Engineer with a degree in Ecosystem Restoration and Environmental Services, Pablo began by giving an overview of the day's project and an explanation of his involvement with the native flora nursery in the park. Pablo also shared with the group information about significant human-caused wildfires that devastated large parts of the park in 2005 and 2011. The latter was the largest and most destructive fire in the park's history. The conservation project on Wednesday was to collect seeds from specific native plants that are critical to full restoration of the burn areas. Specifically, the group would be collecting seeds that could be successfully sprouted in a greenhouse.



**Figure 10 (Left):** Sunrise in Torres del Paine

**Figure 11 (Lower Left):** Pablo gives instruction about the day's activity near the Paine Grande Visitor Center/Ranger Station

**Figure 12 (Lower Right):** Pablo teaching ConservationVIP travelers about the native flora and how to harvest seed.



After the briefing, Pablo led the group a short way up the trail beyond the Paine Grande Visitor Center/Ranger Station to where seed collection began. Plant identification and detailed instruction on how to collect seed from each was given, along with instruction to ensure the plant was left in a healthy and sustainable state. The group was asked to follow the 20% rule. That rule is: never harvest more than 20% from a single plant. On this day, the group collected 17 bags of seed (**Figure 45**) from 5 native species.

- *Did you know? This year, Legacy Fund launched a new project focused on reclamation of native flora, “park to park”. The vision: propagation of native flora within the park, from native genetic material from the park. Seeds collected by ConservationVIP® will be germinated and grown into seedlings at a greenhouse run by Legacy Fund within the park. Seedlings will be planted in their native zones within the park, furthering reclamation of the ecosystems. You can learn more about Legacy Fund and their impactful work at <https://www.tdplegacyfund.org/>.*



**Figures 13, 14, 15** (Left-Right): ConservationVIP travelers collecting seeds.

**Figure 16** (Far Right): One bag of native plant seed collected.

### **Thursday, March 19**

On Thursday, again joined after breakfast by Legacy Fund partner Pablo Sanhuesa, the group embarked on another half-day seed collection activity. This time, harvesting was from a different area of the surrounding steppe biome. The group enjoyed a productive morning, collecting from five more native plant species. Just before lunch, the group said their goodbyes to Pablo and thanked him for the fantastic education about the park’s unique flora and ecosystems and for his leadership of the first volunteer activity.



**Figure 17** (Left) ConservationVIP travelers collecting seed.

**Figure 18** (Right) Pablo sharing knowledge of native flora.

After lunch, it was time to switch gears! First stop was the Paine Grande Ranger Station where Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF) had kindly stored ConservationVIP's tools. The tools had been coordinated ahead of time by Trip Leaders, together with help from Legacy Fund and CONAF. Tools for the next few days' projects included shovels, pickaxes, pick Mattocks, Pulaskis, McLeods, loppers, and hoes (*Figure 19*).



**Figure 19:** Many of the project tools



**Figure 20:** Trip Leader, Eamon, gives instruction.

After a safety briefing on how to carry tools, the group proceeded about ¼ mile up the trail toward Italian Camp. There, the group gathered for a group stretch, in-depth safety tutorial about each tool, and an outline of the next project. This afternoon and for the next three days, the project focus was on construction of water bars. Water bars are a type of drain feature used to divert water off the trail. Diverting water is critical to prevent erosion of a trail system and keep hikers on the trail, for long-term sustainability and protection of the landscape. The projects offered the group the opportunity to learn how to place, construct and maintain these important trail features.



**Figure 21:** A team of 2 begins construction of a new water bar.

In groups of 2 - 3, the ConservationVIP® travelers spread out along the identified section of trail and began to install new water bars. The group enjoyed a sunny and wind-free afternoon, the warmest of the week. At the end of the day, tools were stashed off-trail and concealed from view, ready for collection the following day. Back at Paine Grande, some members of the group enjoyed a cool beverage on the patio, while others opted for a shower or afternoon hike before dinner. Day 2 in the books!

- *Did you know? Refugio Paine Grande can host 300 hikers each night (100 inside + 200 campers), serving hot, freshly made meals at breakfast, lunch and dinner, in addition to other amenities provided. A true global melting pot, there is no shortage*

*of people-watching at this bustling place! The large number of visitors each day also serves as a reminder of how crucial ConservationVIP's continued volunteer efforts are within this popular park.*

### **Friday, March 20**



**Figure 22:** A team of 2 pauses construction of a new water bar

After breakfast, the group set out on the trail toward Italian Camp, pausing to collect tools stashed the prior afternoon. Leap-frogging up the trail in groups of 2-3 (**Figure 22**) to locations flagged by the Trip Leaders, the group continued to construct new water bars and soon reached the turnoff point for Skottsberg Trail.

ConservationVIP and Legacy Fund built the Skottsberg trail over several years between 2017 and 2021. ConservationVIP also designed, built and raised funding for [the Skottsberg bridge](#) and [Skottsberg boardwalk](#).

The trail is a picturesque alternative to the main trail between Paine Grande and Italian Camp, but because it is closed during high-wind days, it does not have the same volume of traffic as the main trail. Water bars were installed at regular intervals during initial construction, but they needed maintenance. After brief education on how to maintain the existing water bars, the group again spread out to maintain the water drainage. At the end of the day, tools were again stashed off trail, concealed from view.

- *Did you know? The Skottsberg trail was constructed to reduce load on the original trail ("old trail") between Paine Grande and Italian Camp, which has suffered damage and erosion due to a growing number of hikers each year. CONAF is now recognizing Skottsberg Trail as an official route, best for lower-wind days, between Paine Grande and Italian Camp, which could reduce load on the old trail by as much as 50%. New trail markers identifying Skottsberg Trail are currently in production.*

### **Saturday, March 21**

Beginning the day with a short hike to where the tools were stashed the prior day, the group continued maintaining water bars along Skottsberg Trail. For those ready for a break from the water drain maintenance activities, this day included some alternate trail maintenance projects. The alternate activities included brushing with loppers and reduction of trail braiding through concealment of redundant ("braided") parallel tracks. While not a permanent fix, concealment will help to reduce foot traffic through the parallel tracks, funneling hikers back onto the main trail. In time, native vegetation will reestablish

itself in the tracks. The recovery was aided in some areas by lightly loosening compacted earth at the surface of the track before concealing the area with duff, downed branches (*Figure 23*), and other loose plant material (*Figure 26*).

As rain showers began to roll in, the group enjoyed lunch overlooking Skottsberg Lake. Tools and gear were then collected and the group hiked back towards the trail split, ready to move on to the next project area.



*Figure 23: A team of 2 collects loose vegetation to aid recovery on closed off, braided trails.*

Back on the “old” trail toward Italian Camp, the group returned to construction of new water bars. Given the worn nature of this section of trail, the task was laborious. It required making deep cuts through established banks (*Figures 24, 25*), to make way for water to drain. Three teams remained committed to water bar construction, while others opted for brushing, concealment of braided tracks, and a small amount of trail revegetation. At the end of the day, tools were once again stashed off trail and out of sight.



*Figures 24-25 (Left-Right): Travelers begin construction of new water bars, cutting into established banks.*

The group saw the first of “true” Patagonia weather this day – a mix of rain, sun, wind, rainbows, and even a small dusting of snow on nearly peaks!

- *Did you know? Located in the southern hemisphere at a latitude of approximately 51 south, Torres del Paine experiences summer from November-March and winter from May-September. By the end of March, the weather is beginning to change. The park is embracing fall, and gorgeous fall colors abound. There are fewer (but still many!) hikers on the trail.*

### **Sunday, March 22**

Sunday was a rest day so the group was treated to a well-deserved day off from volunteer projects. It was also the last day of spectacular weather before heavier rain and winds would come, so the travelers availed themselves of the opportunity to hike, explore, or rest. Most chose a hike to Británico viewpoint via Valle Francés (the French Valley) or hiked the full loop along Skottsberg to Italian Camp and back. Clear skies, low wind, and mid-70 temperatures ensured a beautiful and fulfilling day for all.



**Figure 26:** A section of braided trail is concealed by downed branches.

### **Monday, March 23**

Returning to the location where tools had been stashed along the “old” trail to Italian Camp, the group continued installing water bars, brushing, and concealing braided tracks along another 1/4-1/2 mile of trail. Clouds loomed overhead most of the day, concealing the peaks and bringing the wettest day yet. With more rain came wet and muddy conditions! The group persevered and accomplished much. Smiles abounded as the group could see their water bars in action by the end of the day (**Figure 28**)!



**Figure 27 (Left):** A ConservationVIP traveler removes cut branches after brushing a section of trail.

**Figure 28 (Lower Left):** The group can see a newly constructed water bar in action as rainwater is diverted off the trail; Image also shows a revegetated social bypass, directly at photo center (see Fig. 24 for before)

**Figure 29 (Lower Right):** A team pauses construction of a new water bar to smile for the camera – rain and mud did not deter great progress!



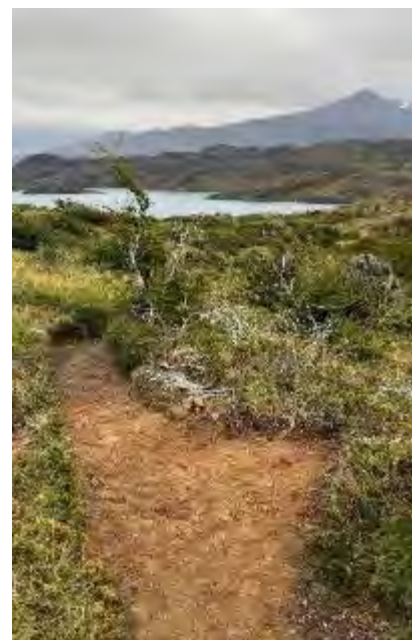
Because this would be the group's final day of water bar construction, all tools were collected for return to the Paine Grande Ranger Station. Along the way, teams paused briefly to inspect and make final adjustments or corrections to the newly constructed water bars.

**Figure 30** (Right): Hiking back with tools at the end of a satisfying day



**Figure 31** (Lower Left): Revegetation in action!

**Figures 32-33** (Lower Center & Right): Newly constructed water bars



## Tuesday, March 24

With the promise of increasingly poor weather (heavier winds and rain), the final volunteer project day was spent closer to home base.

Given the high volume of visitors in and out of Paine Grande, areas directly in front of the refugio and Ranger Station needed maintenance and restoration. A few sections of trail had been identified by Trip Leaders earlier in the week as prime locations for recovery, if given a little TLC. Specifically, trail braiding and widening around puddles was just starting to occur in a few areas – vegetation was being worn and roots were exposed, but the plant life remained. These sections, if protected from further damage, would quickly regrow.

**Figure 34:** A sign at Paine Grande directs visitors to the many amenities and trails accessed from this location.



Selecting new tools appropriate for revegetation (hoes, shovels, mattocks) and some rock removal (shovels, pickaxes, buckets), the group set out to revegetate approximately 150' of worn trail. Rocks were dug in at anchor points to deter foot traffic through the route, plant material was harvested and replanted in the light patches, and duff, downed branches and plant material were used to conceal deeper braided tracks.



**Figure 35** (Top Left): the group revegetates a widening section of trail.

**Figure 36** (Top Right): the group revegetates a puddle bypass and provides rock fill to allow the main trail to be passable.



In parallel, a team of two focused on widening and improving an undersized outlet at the end of a water pipe coming from the Ranger Station, alleviating backup and flooding onto the trail. Another group of two collected rocks to infill one of the deepest puddles (**Figure 36**), creating a route for hikers to remain on trail, rather than continuing to erode the edges.



**Figure 37** (Above Left): the group revegetates and conceals a newly worn bypass trail.

**Figure 38** (Left): the group flanks a section of bypass trail that has just been revegetated and concealed.

At the end of the day, tools were returned to the Ranger Station where Trip Leaders completed an inventory, checking, cleaning, organizing and packing them (**Figures 39, 40**) for later transport by CONAF to longer-term storage at CONAF Administration Office and the Park's Headquarters facility.



**Figures 39-40:** Tools laid out for inventory (Left), then organized and packed – ready for transport (Right)

### **Wednesday, March 25**

The group awoke to their final morning at Paine Grande, and to Patagonian weather in full force! Gusting winds, heavy rain, and hail made for a gray start to the day. A bit nervous that heavy winds would halt the catamaran's daily operations, the group was reassured that it would run without issue – and it did. Bracing against sleet as the group transported all gear and belongings to the boat, the ride was surprisingly smooth, and pockets of blue sky made an appearance. The group enjoyed their final journey across Lago Pehoé. Upon disembarking, the group was greeted by a light dusting of snow! Fall had arrived.



**Figure 41:** Park Superintendent addressing the group.

Traveling once again by private van to Puerto Natales, the group first stopped at the CONAF Administration Office and Park Headquarters. There they enjoyed the visitor's center and were greeted by the park's superintendent, Gersom Frías (**Figure 41**). Gersom thanked the group for volunteering in the park and gifted each person in the ConservationVIP group a lovely book, *The Paradise of Patagonia: Torres del Paine National Park*.

Continuing on, the group also stopped at the Milodon Cave Natural Monument (**Figure 42**), just outside Puerto Natales. The group enjoyed about two hours exploring the monument and visiting the caves, slightly abbreviated due to the very chilly, wet weather – all were eager for a hot shower!

The group checked in to the Natalino Hotel for their final night. Everyone enjoyed time to refresh before meeting for one final dinner together, a traditional lamb barbecue (**Figure 43**). As a special thank you, Pablo Sanhuesa was invited to join for dinner. The group enjoyed a final evening together, having come full circle from where they began.



**Figure 42:** View from inside the largest Milodon cave



**Figure 43:** Traditional Lamb BBQ at El Asador

### Thursday, March 26

Having said most farewells the evening before, Trip Leaders arose to see the first group leave for the airport before enjoying a relaxing breakfast with others. Each traveler was thanked for their contribution to the trip – everyone bringing something truly special to the time together, and for the benefit of Torres del Paine National Park.

Until next time, Patagonia!



**Figure 44:** March 18 group photo with Pablo Sanhuesa

## Summary of Accomplishments on the March 2026 Volunteer Trip

- Total Hours in the field on Conservation Projects: 355 hours.
- Native Species Seed Collected: approximately 16 Quarts from 10 Species.
- Water Bars Constructed/Maintained: approximately 40.
- Trail Revegetation: approximately 175 Linear Feet
- Trail Braiding/Social Trail Removal: approximately 250 Linear Feet
- Trail Improvements (brushing & small obstructions removed): approx. ½ Mile.



**Figure 45-46** (Top Left, Right): Bags of collected seed.

**Figure 47** (Above): Map showing project site locations each day.