

Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars & More ... | Trip Report

August 13 – 21, 2018 | Written by Client Karen Worcester



With Guides Xavier Muñoz and Greg Smith, and participants Jerry, Kay, Fiona, Nancy, Thomas, Sherry, Holly, Larry, Wendi, Frank, and Leslie



Monday, 13 August Cuiaba | Pousa Alegre

We were at the São Paulo airport early, and by ten o'clock or so we were in Cuiaba, a two hour flight north east of São Paulo, in the state of Mato Grosso. It had the look of a small town grown large. I was particularly fascinated by the tangles of cables and wires festooning the utility poles alongside the road. The steamy heat was a shock to our systems after the cool of the Atlantic Forest.

We drove through five miles of commerce before reaching mixed savannah woodland and scrub forest. Every time we pulled over, there was an extravaganza of new species. On our very first stop, at a roadside pond, we saw Capybara lounging under a tree, Savanna Hawk, Snail Kite, Black-collared Hawk, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Horned Screamer, Anhinga, Southern Lapwing, Capped Heron, and Wattled Jacana! And then there was



the Jabiru. This creature is extraordinary with its sculpted black head and inflated red neck. It looks like a mask carved from wood plopped on the head of an over-sized wood stork. It holds its head very still with its bill slightly open in the heat and its red throat expanded and full of fish. The word “jabiru” actually means “swollen neck” in the native tongue. Over the course of the several stops we made we saw Ringed Kingfisher, Wood Stork, Cocoi Heron, Great and Snowy Egrets, and the exorbitant Roseate Spoonbill.



Our planned lunch stop and tractor ride were thwarted because the restaurant was closed for two days due to an “unexpected event.” So, we traveled back 10 km towards Cuiaba to a churrascaria, where after filling our plates from the buffet, we were served round after round of different cuts of mostly beef (but including chicken hearts) carved from skewers, hot from the grill. Greg had warned us to pace ourselves and he was right.



After lunch, we continued to introduce ourselves to the denizens who would be our friends for the next week or so. At stops along the road, we found waders like Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Striated Heron, Buff-necked, Plumbeous, Bare-faced, and Green Ibis, Grey-cowled Wood-Rail, Limpkin, and some land-loving Bare-faced Curassow. We also found smaller birds of the bush, such as Guira Cuckoo, Orange-backed Troupial, Black-backed Water-Tyrant, and Yellow-billed Cardinal (oddly named as it is best distinguished by its deep red cap). We passed mobs of caiman, lounging at the water’s edge, and one swimming by, towing a wreath of water hyacinth. A not-so-enormous-but-still-plenty-large anaconda, maybe 6 or 7 feet in length, was curled up in shallow water, using his tail end as a headrest. We saw many nests, some still with nestlings. My favorite was the Jabiru, a giant ball of sticks supporting a female with two fluffy, beaky chicks.



And underneath the Jabiru nests are condominiums for Monk Parakeets, who pay their rent by sounding the alarm when a hawk or other predator is near. We also saw nests of Plumbeous Ibis, Orange-eyed Thornbird, Southern Caracara, Crested Oropendola, and the rounded mud oven of the Rufous Hornero. Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys could have been a satisfactory mammal to end the drive to Pouso Alegre, but we capped it all off with a family of Tapir! The little one was beautifully striped and was following its parents in the underbrush along the side of road. What an unexpected treat! We arrived and checked in at Pouso Alegre just in time for dinner, and just before seven were greeted by a gorgeous Giant Anteater, who wandered around the grounds in between guests for fifteen minutes or so. She was pregnant and was busy scarfing up ants as fast as she could, rooting around with her long, improbable nose deep into the duff.

Tuesday, 14 August – Pouso Alegre

Our morning started out well at the bird feeders behind the lodge, where papaya and banana were being assaulted by Yellow-billed Cardinals. A particularly witty viewer remarked, “Holy smokes! A conclave of cardinals!”, and we couldn’t stop laughing. Others breakfasting included Chestnut-eared Aracari, Purplish Jay, Turquoise-fronted Parrot, White-tipped Dove, and Greater Kiskadee.

A hike in the vicinity of the lodge took us past an enormous beehive in a morassia tree with its huge spreading canopy. The trumpet trees or “Tabebuia” were beginning to flower with their extravagant blossoms of yellow or pink. Tabebuia is the National Tree of Brazil and here in July it is late winter, but the flowers are blooming and many birds are nesting already.

This forest does not support epiphytes like the bromeliads that we saw in the Atlantic Forest, but rather hydrophytes, plants that tolerate submerging for a portion of the year. Aerial roots of strangler figs hang to the ground. The fig grows up and eventually kills the host tree. Other striking plants include the ant tree with its bright red fruits, and the jelly flower, with blooms as sweet as honeysuckle. A Turquoise-fronted Parrot couple exchanged tender pleasantries at the mouth of their strangler fig cavity home. We got a good look at a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl looking down at us from the canopy, as well as a Rufous-browed Peppershrike. Several of us were treated to the stunning Campo Flicker as it foraged for breakfast offerings.





After our walk we headed out for a pre-lunch ride to see what we could find. Our various stops brought us Red-billed Scythebill, Black-fronted Nunbird, White-lored Spinetail, Mato Grosso Antbird, another stunning Orange-backed Troupial, Silver-beaked Tanager (who glows black-red), Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, the charming Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Moustached Wren, Cinnamon-bellied Seedeater, and Masked Gnatcatcher. A treasure trove of new bird species!

After our siesta we left for an evening drive around 4:00 PM, after the peak of the heat had waned. A stunning pair of White Woodpeckers caught our attention early in the drive, and we had good looks at Great Black Hawk and Black-collared Hawk. We passed Capybara and browsing Brown Brocket Deer and the powdery dirt of the road made perfect impressions of caiman tails and jacana feet. We stopped at a watering hole to wait and see what the evening would bring. And it brought a lot! We saw our first Azara's Agouti grazing near the water's edge next to an unconcerned Sunbittern. The commonly seen, but exquisite Gray-cowled Wood-Rail and the less commonly seen Undulated Tinamou also found supper there. A

tall Cecropia tree hosted a Toco Toucan, who looked on for some time before relinquishing his perch. A raucous explosion of Chaco Chachalaca caused a otherwise peaceful scene. As the light other mammals made their appearance. course hunting crabs along the far edge trotted towards us and then behind our vanishing back into the forest. He was Brocket Deer came in for a drink and a ambled across the field at a distance. grew dark, the Common Parakeet came the sky. It was a fruitful night for



brief upset of the dimmed more and more, A Crab-eating Fox was of of the pond, but then viewing area, before wonderfully close! A Gray South American Coati And finally, as the skies out to pluck insects from naturalists.

Wednesday, 15 August

Some of us were lucky to see a Bat grounds at first light, and a Tayra was distance. Today we boarded an open-air made for easier viewing. We saw three Macaws perched in a tree for once; they rapidly past far overhead. We passed Monkeys, another Coati, a family of Brocket Deer rocketing through the bush. A Sunbittern flew up, flashing his butterfly wings at us. More wood-rail hunted intently for crabs until they got spooked by a Southern Caracara landing nearby. Because this landscape floods during a good portion of the year, there are no small rodents, and the food base for many is fish and crabs (including the ferocious looking Caiman). Some of the other species sighted this morning included Striated Heron, Green Kingfisher, Cocoi Heron, Black-capped Donacobius, Plumbeous Ibis, and a very cooperative Savanna Hawk. Yellow-headed Vulture soared over our heads and the best photo op of the day probably came

Pousa Alegre

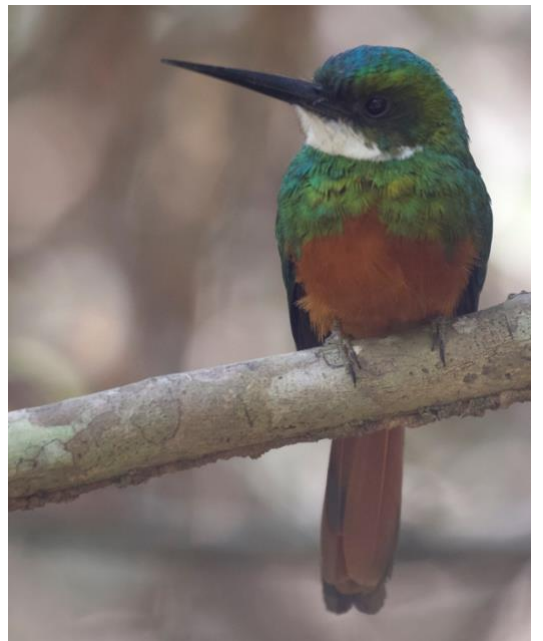
Falcon on the poussa also spotted at a truck for our drive, which gorgeous Hyacinth usually seem to be flying Brown Capuchin Capybara, and Brown



from the three charming Guira Cuckoos lined up together to watch our truck pass.

We stopped for coffee and a shopping break at a small cafe and our return trip brought us another Campo Flicker posing on a termite mound and a Planalto Slaty-Antshrike. A giant pile of fresh dung could only have been left by a Tapir!

It was hot! So, our days had been planned around a mid-day siesta. In the later afternoon we headed out again in the truck. We were privileged to see a pair of Great Black Hawks copulating, and watched more giant Jabiru in their giant nests (up to two meters deep!) reorganizing sticks for the comfort of their chicks. The tiny Black-tailed Marmoset viewed us from a safe perch. The fragrance of the jelly flower wafted in the cooling air, and the kapok tree released clouds of fluff from its bursting pods. We finished the evening at the watering hole where we saw many of our friends from the night before, and watched an Aplomado Falcon snatch a bat out of the sky.



Thursday, 16 August Pousa Alegre to Porto Jofre

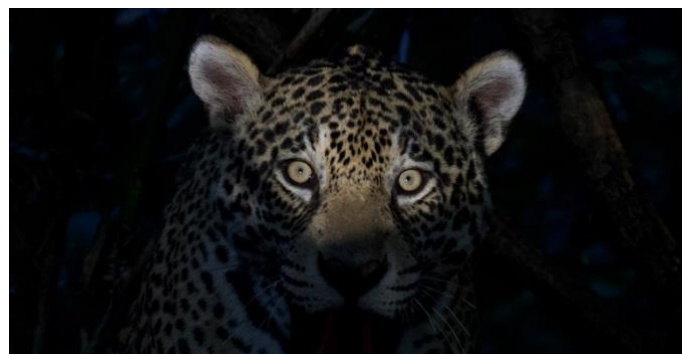
This morning we left Pousa Alegre and began our drive to the Rio Cuiaba to start our Jaguar adventure. Our stops were carefully chosen, as we had a lot of miles to cover before dusk. We had a troop of White-lipped Peccary cross the road and disappear into the bushes, babies trailing behind. We watched a Jabiru struggle for some time to gain control over the giant fish it had caught. There is definitely an energetic expenditure required to down something three times the width of your beak! An artifact and unexpected benefit of the raised roadway were the constructed perennial wetlands immediately paralleling it that were alive with all kinds of bird life. We got a good look at the tiny but charismatic Pygmy Kingfisher, as well as the Muscovy Duck (the native, wild kind) with, as some coined it, its Frieda Kahlo headdress.

We stopped at Pousa Mato Grosso on the Pixaim River to have lunch, mug with the plaster Jaguar bench, enjoy the feeders (loaded with Yellow-beaked Cardinal, troupials, Silver-beaked Tanager, Solitary Cacique, and more), walk the forest trail, and enjoy our first boat ride. This lodge is located in an ecotone between gallery forest, wetland, and grassland and the diversity is high. We were especially charmed by a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, who stuck to his perch immediately next to the trail as we all tromped passed, clicking our cameras furiously at him.

On our boat ride we watched yet another bird, a Neotropic Cormorant, tangle with an oversized fish, in this case a *Plecostomus*, well outfitted with spiny fins. A Black-collared Hawk flew low over our heads, and we found a beautiful Agami Heron skulking behind the water hyacinths. Xavier cut a slice of hyacinth to show us that the center is like styrofoam, providing the flotation needed by the plant. We saw screamers and Maguari Stork and Little Blue Heron, and heard a Great Horned Owl calling during our stop.

Back on the bus, our stops brought us a very cooperative Chotoy Spinetail who flirted with us for some time, a Grayish Saltator munching a yellow trumpet flower, Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher, Muscovy Duck, Whistling Heron, and both Black-backed Water-Tyrant and White-headed Marsh-Tyrant. At a stop to admire the grasslands, Xavier described the Pantanal as the Everglades on steroids (or asteroids, as he pronounced it). He grabbed a Giant Snail shell and said that there is no pesticide use in the area, so these snails are clean food for Limpkin. A flock of Yellow-chevroned Parakeets escorted the bus for long enough to give us all a thrill.

Finally, we reached the Rio Cuiaba. Hyacinth Macaws sent us off on our first boat ride with good luck. It took us approximately 45 minutes to spot our first Jaguar. He looked casually down off the river bank as boats respectfully queued up for some fine looks. The boats are in radio contact, so when a Jaguar is sighted, there is great excitement as the boat zooms down the river to reach the destination before the spotted cat disappears back into the underbrush. All in all, we got outstanding looks at two Jaguar this, our first evening on the Rio Cuiaba, and finished the day motoring back to our house boat under a lovely paint-by-number sunset.





Friday, 17 August Rio Cuiaba

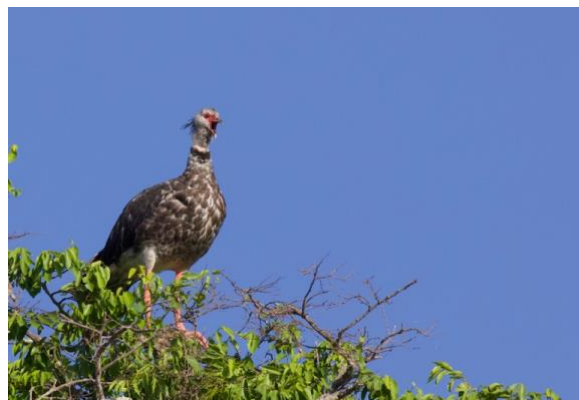
We spent much of the morning watching four different Jaguars grooming, yawning, snoozing, stretching, rolling, lounging, hunting along the shoreline, and even swimming. They were magnificent! Their spots are large and small, and always so dramatic. Big black ones on their belly, smaller ones on their faces, and the spots on their flanks look like someone dipped their fingers in finger-paints to make circular clusters of dots. Beautiful! One female Jaguar we followed for a very long time—over an hour—as she worked her way up river. Our boat driver would anticipate where she was likely to emerge and park himself in a premium location, including in front of a log she opted to climb out on to lay down for a look at the river.

It was hard to imagine that we weren't interfering with these cats, but each time the cat scratched or yawned, as the motor driver chatter, the animal didn't even take the time to turn its head. What an amazing opportunity for us, and honestly, the cats just really didn't seem to mind.

The river was the color of tea with a little milk in it. The high-water line looked in places to be eight feet or so above the current water level. Rushes, grasses, and water hyacinth grew on the bank edges, but in many places the banks were cut by river flow erosion, exposing torturous roots systems of trees ready to topple. The wakes of the boats might cause and certainly contribute to this erosion, but the banks of narrow, vegetation-clogged channels also exhibited this phenomenon. The Jaguars have an excellent view from above, which may be part of the reason they are so successful at hunting Capybara and Caiman.



The morning was full even from a birding perspective. We had Black-collared Hawks looking on from their perch, the harder-to-see Barred Antshrike, and Pied Plover bobbing and strutting on a sand bar. A Turquoise-fronted Parrot male fed his mate as she emerged from her nest cavity. A roosting colony of Boat-billed Heron peered down from on high with their huge eyes and wide beak, perfectly suited for their crab diet. A Nacunda Nighthawk flew overhead while foraging in daylight during migration.



Back to the boat for lunch and a rest, and then back out at 2:30.

Xavier caused a giant commotion by playing a tape of Giant Otter. Four of them came racing out from under the overhanging vegetation, lined up and started squealing, barking, and screaming at us like a tribe of hellions. Then, just as quickly, they were off across the river, to catch and eat fish, holding them in their paws while biting their heads off. We could have watched them all day.

It turned into a beautiful, serene evening after the day cooled and the sun began to sink. Caiman basked at the water's edge, and a family of Capybara lounged on a sand bar mid-river, where they maintained an excellent view of any approaching Jaguar. We watched a beautiful female Jaguar stroll along the river, stopping to nibble grass here and there. A huge flock of Brown-chested Martins descended on a tree to chatter at us while a Yellow-billed Tern flew overhead. The low-lying sun lit up the feathers of all the waders, and finally nightjars made their crepuscular appearance.

After dinner, we watched Bulldog Bats fishing in front of the boat as they danced in the spotlight. Every once in a while, one would dip into the water to pick a fish up for dinner.

Saturday, 18 August Porto Jofre to Pousada Rio Claro

Our morning boat ride brought us two more Jaguars, bringing our sighting total to an impressive ten for the trip. The first was napping at the bank's edge, showing off his fine black belly spots. The second, was a female we watched for a long time. She was younger and somewhat shyer, staying back from the edge in and around tree branches. She groomed and yawned and watched us with interest, not fear. The lighting on her was spectacular, reflecting off the water and providing amazing photo opportunities. This morning we got the cats to ourselves. Three boats with engines off sitting quietly—such a pleasure!



After lunch we loaded up the boat and headed back down the river to Porto Jofre and onto our bus for a ride to Pousada Rio Claro. For most of the ride we rested, but had a quick coffee stop at Pousada Mato Grosso and did manage to see two Marsh Deer, still with velvety antlers. We walked the road near the entrance to the lodge and also saw Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Picui Ground-Dove, and more Whistling Heron. All of this was followed by a dramatic sunset.

Sunday, 19 August Rio Claro

A full day today! We started with a parrot-filled morning walk before breakfast that included Turquoise-fronted Parrot, Orange-winged Parrot, Scaly-headed Parrot,

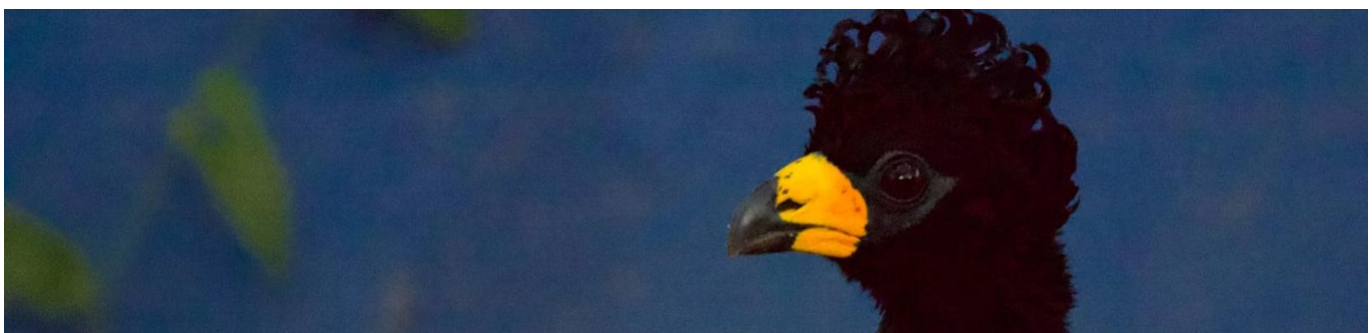
Peach-fronted Parakeet, Nanday Parakeet, Monk Parakeet, and Blue-crowned Parakeet. A Crab-eating Fox trotted across a far field while Brown Capuchin Monkeys watched us with interest from their high vantage point.

After breakfast we all loaded onto boats for a ride on the lovely Rio Claro, with its water hyacinth-lined banks and toucans flying overhead. The river treated us to a flash of a Sungrebe, Yellow-Collared Macaw swooping overhead, the improbable Anhinga swimming across the river like a water snake, a Sunbittern flying off into the forest flashing his butterfly wings, and a gorgeous male Helmeted Manakin showing his gleaming ruby-red crown.

We squeezed in a short bus ride before lunch, but it was hot and very quiet. We watched a few shy Whistling Herons by the side of the road, and I got to see the backside of a Red-legged Seriema.

We siesta-ed until 4:00, for which I think we all were grateful. We took a short walk through the gallery forest adjacent to the lodge and found a pair of Barred Antshrike, admired a giant strangler fig tree with an excellent cavity for some nesting couple. These huge trees are called “tree of life” in Brazilian, because of the many birds, snakes, and other creatures they support.

On the short boat ride before dinner we did not locate the elusive Zigzag Heron, but did spotlight tiny bats flitting beneath a tree’s canopy and more nightjars finding their dinner on the wing. It was a serene and lovely ride to finish off the day.





After dinner we loaded up into a safari vehicle and went for a night ride, with Xavier sweeping the road and passing vegetation with his spotlight. No Tapirs this time, but we did scare up two Brown Brocket Deer, a Crab-eating Fox, and a troop of Collared Peccaries, a new species for us on this trip.



Monday, 20 August Pousada Piuval

Our last day! We boarded the bus and began making our way back to Cuiaba. We stopped briefly at the Pousada Mato Grosso on the Pixiam River for a coffee break, and then continued on to Pousada Piuval, where we made up for our missed tractor when we last passed this way. This lovely lodge is on an extensive ranch supporting acres of wetland, gallery forests, and savannah. We didn't in fact use a tractor, because the ground was fairly dry now, so we boarded a safari truck instead and eased our way across the relatively open landscape. It was chilly and many animals were huddled together for warmth (including us!). We saw a ball of monkey high in a tree, that after counting heads, appeared to be a family of four Black-and-gold Howlers. Capybara were tucked into the bank out of the wind, and many birds were hunkered down on their nests. In the forest, the branches were dense with nests of Jabiru, American Wood Stork, and other wading birds, while the shrubs and forest floor below were white with guano. We watched another Coati bound across the field, and Greater Rhea grazed contentedly. Brazilian

Teal joined waders in the wetland ponds and an occasional spoonbill always got our attention. On one walk we crossed over a large wetland on an elevated log walkway. In the mud of the wetland we saw giant cat tracks that



likely belonged to a Puma, and at the far side we were treated to both White-barred and White-wedged Piculets, tiny woodpeckers that flitted about in the depths of a shrubbery, waiting for us to find and admire them. We also got to climb a four-story high viewing platform and admire the forests, ponds, grasslands, and savannahs that make up this rich landscape.

We returned to the ranch, chilly and ready for the steaming hot lunch that awaited us. The food in Brazil had generally been varied and good, and Pousada Piuval was no exception. Meals were served buffet style. There was usually some type of stewed beef, fried fish, or

chicken, rice, beans, plantains, fried cassava meal with vegetables, fresh vegetables and fruits, and often rice pudding, guava preserves, and similar fare.

As we finished lunch and just before boarding the bus, one of our group found an active Blue-and-Yellow Macaw nest. Both parents were in attendance and didn't seem to mind us getting some very fine looks!

But alas, we had to move onward towards Cuiaba. After a rest we enjoyed our last dinner together at another churrascaria, where we ate grilled beef, pork, chicken, pineapple (sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar), and sausage to a point of absurdity. It was delicious!

And the next morning it was hard saying goodbye to this group of very special people who shared such a wonderful experience together.

All Photos by Greg Smith.

Pg. 1: Group in Pantanal. Pg. 2: Toco Toucans, Plumbeous Ibis, Southern Lapwing, Jabiru, immature Rufescent Tiger-Heron. Pg. 4: Yellow-billed Cardinal, Giant Anteater, Little Woodpecker, Campo Flicker. Pg. 5: Great Black Hawk, Jabiru portrait. Pg. 6: Guira Cuckoo, Southern Caracara, Rufous-tailed Jacamar. Pg. 7: Neotropic Cormorant, Jaguar, Eyes of the Jaguar. Pg. 8: Jaguar resting, Three Capybara, Giant Otters. Pg.9: Pied Plover, Southern Screamer. Pg. 10: Nanday Parakeet, Turquoise-fronted Parrot pair, Bare-faced Curassow. Pg. 11: Limpkin, Red-legged Seriema, Greater Rhea, Blue-and-yellow Macaw. Pg. 12: Jabiru flight, Brown Capuchin.