

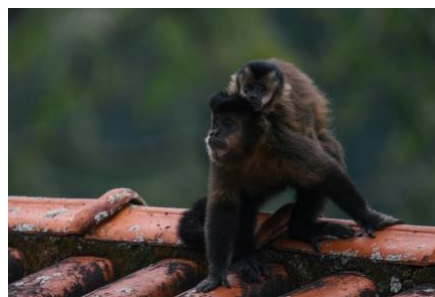
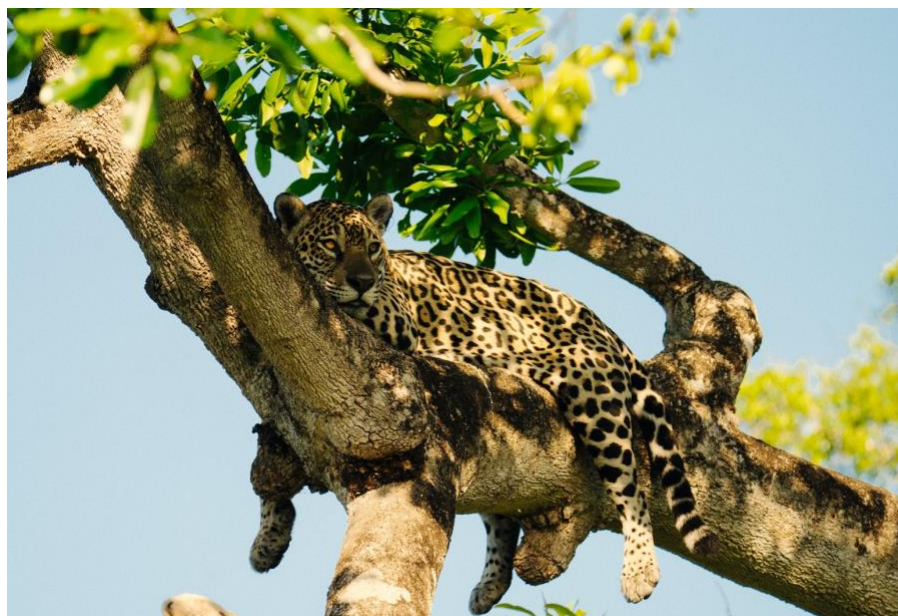
# Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars! & More

## Sept. 9 – 19, 2023 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson

*Featuring Pre-tour Atlantic Forest Extension*



**With guides Wes, Marco and Rosalino; and participants: Barbara, Charles, Diane, Jan, Joyce, Laura, Mike, Rita, Sandra, Stacy and Thomas**



### Arrivals

Some much-needed rest in the São Paulo Marriott was a welcome relief after long flights from the United States. Then we met in the lobby for some introductory Caipirinhas and a great buffet-style meal with some delicious Brazilian favorites. The first night is always a fun time to swap stories and backgrounds, and it was evident from the start that this group had a lot in common.

### Wed., Sept. 6                      São Paulo to Itatiaia

After an early breakfast we loaded into the van and headed for the Atlantic rainforest and the Itatiaia National Park. During some rather productive stops along the way, we saw a number of birds and had a great look at a large Argentine tegu that was looking for its next meal. Birds on the trip included Sayaca Tanagers, Cliff Flycatchers, Crested Caracara and a number of other interesting species.



When we arrived to Hotel do Ypê and our accommodations, we were absolutely floored by the diversity of bird life around the feeders, and instantly many of us saw several lifers and were able to get some great photos as well. One special surprise was a Frilled Coquette, usually a very tricky bird to find and a truly amazing little visitor to the feeders. We also were astonished by the bright colors of the Green-headed Tanagers, Blue Dacnis and a variety of other birds darting in and out of the area. This is a great location for hummingbirds and aside from the coquette, we spied a number of different hummingbird species including Brazilian Ruby-and-black Jacobin. A family of black capuchins also called the area around the feeders home, and we watched as they played on top of the dining room roof. It was a wonderful introduction to the area.

After lunch we took a short walk through the rainforest and managed to find a few new birds including a show-stopping Swallow-tailed Manakin. The forest here is incredibly lush and full of life, and over dinner we all chatted about birds that we still hoped to see during our remaining two days in the area.

## **Thurs., Sept. 7                      First Full Day in Itatiaia National Park**

We woke up to a damp morning from the previous night's rain and fog, and the cool, misty jungle-covered mountains were a beautiful sight. Even more beautiful were the colorful tanagers, finches and hummingbirds visiting the feeders early in the morning, and some of the group caught sight of some Blue-winged Macaws. Following a delicious breakfast at our hotel, we set out for the first excursion of the day, a visit to the park visitor center where the birding is actually quite good. We had some great sightings including a Green-backed Trogon, Red-breasted Toucan and Scaled Woodcreeper. We returned to the hotel for some more coffee and tea, then part of the group set out on another excursion, while others preferred to relax at the hotel and watch the feeders. The excursion visited an old, abandoned hotel to access some nice trails. We found three different species of spinetail, as well as a Tufted Antbird, which really hung around for a while and gave us a nice look. Back at the hotel, the feeders hosted some great new birds including a gorgeous Brazilian Tanager.

We had a delicious lunch at the hotel and spent some time relaxing and watching the beautiful clouds roll in and over the forested mountains. Hotel do Ypê truly is a special place, and the environment combined with the constant calls of rainforest birds made for a very meditative experience. Our final excursion that evening was a one mile walk down a trail that took us through dense jungle along the side of a mountain. We saw some





amazing birds on the trail including a Saffron Toucanet as well as our first antwrens and gnateaters. While the trail proved to be a bit longer than we thought, the beautiful Atlantic rainforest surrounded our group and continued to deliver amazing birds and vistas. Back at the hotel, we gathered to go over the list, reliving the day and making plans for our last full day in Itatiaia.

## **Fri., Sept. 8**

### **Full Day in Itatiaia National Park**

Today was a full-day excursion for most of the group in the beautiful Itatiaia National Park. The Atlantic rainforest is distributed over various altitudes, and the flora and fauna change as one moves up or down through the park. Today, the main group would travel to higher elevations where they would see several new birds including the Robust Woodpecker, the Burnished-buff Tanager, Brassy-breasted Tanager and a variety of other beautiful and interesting species. Although I couldn't join the excursion, I was thrilled to hear the reports of the trip and see photos when the group returned. It was an especially clear and beautiful day in the park, and like always we gathered in the evening to go over the list and eat some of the delicious food at Hotel do Ypê. Another highlight that afternoon was when the Frilled Coquette showed up again, perched on a branch where everyone was able to get some great shots of this tiny, charismatic hummingbird.

## **Sat., Sept. 9**

### **Morning Birding in Itatiaia and Return to São Paulo for the Start of the Main Tour**

The group woke up early for breakfast, and then some departed for some birding at a lookout and then at the Visitor's Center. We were lucky to see a lot of the beautiful tanagers that we had already seen in the park as well as many new birds too, including Golden-crowned Warblers and White-throated Woodcreepers. We returned to Hotel do Ypê for the group to get their things packed up and do some final birding around the lodge, finding more Saffron Toucanets, Frilled Coquette, tanagers, caciques and many, many more. Suddenly, one of the resident capuchin monkeys decided to throw a bit of tantrum and started throwing the tiles off the roof while a few visitors watched! After lunch, we loaded into the van and settled in for a long drive back to São Paulo where we met up with our remaining group member, Stacy, and said a sad goodbye to Mike and Rita.

## **Sun., Sept. 10**

### **São Paulo to Campo Grande and Aguapé**

The group departed early in the morning for an early flight to Campo Grande in Mato Grosso do Sul Brazil.



Arriving in Mato Grosso, we loaded into a van and headed out for Aguapé and the São Jose Ranch. Along the way we saw many birds including Blue-and-yellow Macaws, Greater Rhea and Savannah Hawks. But the true wildlife watching began when we turned onto the dirt road toward Aguapé. Just 10 km into our drive, we saw our first giant anteater right next to the road! It crossed in front of us and then fed not far from the road while we watched. What a thrill to have such a wonderful sighting, but little did we know we would see 14 more giant anteaters along the roadway on the drive into Aguapé! This must be some kind of record!

Arriving at the lodge, we received a typical Aguapé greeting of multiple flocks of both Hyacinth and Blue-and-yellow Macaws around the central lodge. This is a birder's paradise, and as we settled into our accommodations, we marveled at the large number of impressive tropical birds all over the lodge grounds. After a delicious lunch, we headed out on our first safari with our Aguapé guide, Rosalino. He, Marco and Wes scanned for the birds and mammals that call Aguapé home. And we saw a lot of them! Great sightings included crab-eating fox, Agouti, Whistling Heron, Great Potoo, Campo Flicker and many, many more. Aguapé is so alive with wildlife that it is intoxicating, and we all felt the energy of the Pantanal wash over us as we returned home from our sunset safari and ate yet another tasty meal at the lodge.

## **Mon., Sept. 11                      Full Day at Aguapé**

Today we woke up early for a sunrise safari with Rosalino. It is very hot this time of year in the Pantanal, and many of the birds and mammals are only active in the early mornings and late afternoons. We had a great morning finding Vermilion Flycatcher, Common Potoo, Roadside Hawk, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and many more.

The food at Aguapé is delicious. A lot of the food comes from the farm, and it is fresh and authentically Brazilian. Much as the bird sightings were so hard to count and remember, we also lost track of the number of Brazilian cheeses and breads we ate!

Because the day was so hot, we opted to delay the post-lunch safari until the evening when it had cooled off. Once again, we were lucky to have some incredible wildlife encounters including an amazing trip to a wetland where we observed hundreds of Jabiru and Wood Storks flying, roosting and drinking. Several times on this safari the vehicle would turn a corner and the whole group would gasp in amazement at the sheer number of birds. It was truly a safari to remember!





After dinner, some of the group participated in a night safari to search for some of the mammals that we had not yet seen but might be easier to spot at night. Although we didn't find ocelot, we DID see a Brazilian tapir and a lesser anteater (southern tamandua)! It was a very productive night trip.

## **Tues., Sept. 12                      Aquiduna River Trip and Travel Back to Campo Grande**

On the morning of our last day at Aguapé, we arranged for us to talk with one of the biologists studying giant anteaters at the Instituto Tamandua, and she explained the work they are doing to rehabilitate injured giant anteaters in the area. It was a very informative presentation, and we were happy to learn that one of the most iconic mammals in the Pantanal has such a great organization dedicated to its conservation.

Leaving Aguapé is never easy, but at least we had one last safari on the Aquiduna River. One of the highlights here is viewing the Band-tailed Manakin lek, and while this colorful little fireball of a bird can be a bit tricky to see sometimes, we were treated to especially good views of a very brightly colored male. Other birds we saw on the river included Saffron-billed Sparrow, Mato Grosso Antbird and many Toco Toucans. Our sore backsides also appreciated the smooth river ride, as the bumpy trails and roads of the São Jose fazenda can be a bit much after a couple days!

After lunch, we loaded into our van and said one last goodbye to the macaws, parakeets, saffron finches, cardinals and jays of Aguapé, then took off down the bumpy dirt road toward Campo Grande. We stopped on the way to view a Maguari Stork, and again for some snacks at a roadside café and gift shop. After checking in to our hotel near the airport in Campo Grande, we ate dinner together in the hotel restaurant and reviewed our growing species list in high spirits. But we had to turn in early to be ready for our extremely early flight the next morning.

## **Wed., Sept. 13                      Campo Grande to Piuval**

We woke up at 2 AM to catch our 4:30 AM flight to Cuiaba. Arriving in Cuiaba, we noticed the weather seemed to be changing quickly as we loaded into the van and grabbed some breakfast for the drive to the Transpantaneira. Unfortunately, Stacy started feeling bad on the flight and she decided to wait in Cuiaba to rest and then rejoin the group down the line.



Because the flight was so early, we had time to visit some gift shops in Pocone and do some birding at the beginning of the Transpantaneira. Then we checked into our lodging at the Pousada Piuval just as a storm hit. Howling winds preceded the rain, yet a few of our group decided to do the afternoon safari in the rain. While the conditions were not perfect, we did see a lot of birds and a few mammals including some new species like Black-fronted Nunbird and Chestnut-bellied Guan. It was a fun, somewhat soggy trip, but we managed to dry out back at the lodge and enjoyed a delicious meal in the Piuval cafeteria.

### **Thurs., Sept. 14                      Full Day at Pousada Piuval**

After breakfast, we loaded into the safari vehicle to explore the area surrounding the lodge. While still a bit cloudy and chilly, this would prove to be a very productive safari with many new birds! Some of the highlights included Red-crested Finches, Flavescent Warblers, Sun Bitterns and Plumbeous Kites. Soon the sun broke through the clouds, and it seemed as though the birds and animals were happy with the change as we were.

Following lunch back at the Pousada, Marco led the group on a short photography walk, after which we enjoyed our second safari of the day, one that would deliver an amazing surprise. We had great looks at Whistling Herons and Blue-crowned Trogon. But the biggest prize of the night came when we turned a corner and Diana screamed, "JAGUAR! JAGUAR! JAGUAR!" and we watched as a large, male Jaguar disappeared into the brush. Moments later it reappeared, walking down the road unfazed by our presence. We were able to follow for over 30 minutes, watching this amazing cat as it bit at flies that were pestering it, and even gave chase to some peccaries. Even our guides were awed by the experience. Jaguars are seldom found from anywhere besides a boat. As we drove back to the pousada, we all marveled at the insane luck that we had to witness this apex predator of South America. Going over the list at dinner, the group was all smiles as we continued talking about just how special the sighting had been to each of us.

### **Fri., Sept. 15                      Pousada Piuval to Panoramico Houseboat Hotel**

Today we woke up early to eat breakfast and say our goodbyes to the beautiful Pousada Piuval and its amazing wildlife. We loaded into the minibus and started down the Transpantaneira, and soon we were viewing Capped



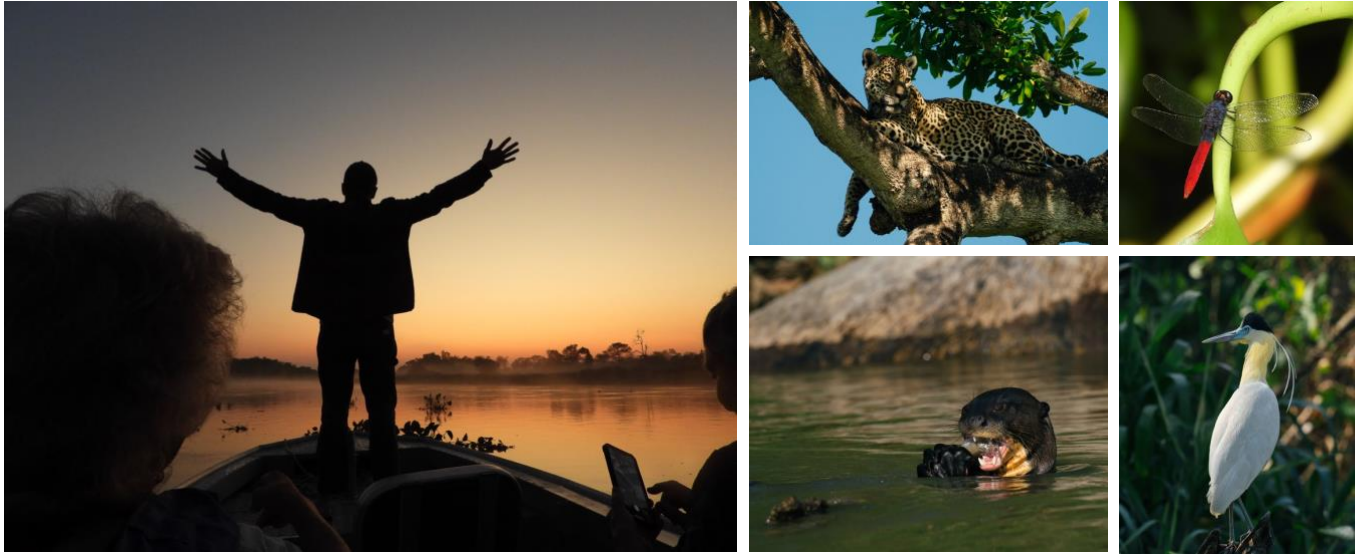


Hérons, Hyacinth Macaws, Jabiru Storks and many more. Marsh deer were another pleasant surprise, with an especially big male being quite cooperative for the photographers in the group. But it was the reptiles that stole the show today! Our driver spotted a medium-sized yellow anaconda in the road that was moving slow enough that we were all able to take photos and videos of the large constrictor. Then, not much further down the road, we found a small group of bright yellow butterflies landing on the head of a caiman who didn't seem to mind the extra attention.

Once we arrived in Porto Jofre, we loaded into small boats to head to the Panoramico Houseboat, a comfortable, well-staffed facility situated far out on the Cuiaba River, making it an ideal base for Jaguar spotting. Our first boat safari departed at 3 PM, and while we didn't find any Jaguars, we did see a variety of birds including a great look at a Jabiru nest with young visible, both Green and Ringed Kingfishers, Rufescent Tiger-Hérons, Cocoi Herons and many other beautiful birds. We returned to the boat surrounded by Banded Nightjars, then gathered to review our species list and enjoy some delicious food and drinks onboard our floating hotel.

## **Sat., Sept. 16                      Full Day on the Cuiaba River and Panoramico Houseboat Hotel**

We woke up very early this morning to be out on the river looking for Jaguars as quickly as possible, and it paid off. It didn't take us long to find a beautiful female Jaguar high in a tree overhanging the river, and because the houseboat is so close to the best stretch of river, we were one of the first boats there. This gave us a great look at the impressive cat while she casually scanned the water beneath for caiman. We were almost starting to lose our focus when suddenly she sprang from the tree and jumped about 15 feet to the water and hyacinths below. The jump was astounding and even more impressive was the fact that she managed to catch the caiman! We had a front row seat as she swam the river with the small crocodilian clutched in her mouth, and then we watched her drag it up the riverbank and through the brush, apparently to a waiting cub that we were never lucky enough to spot. On our way back to the houseboat, we also got a good, close-up look at some Giant River Otters, as well as several great birds including a very close tiger-heron nest and some beautiful kingfishers and Capped Herons.



We had lunch on the houseboat and had fun sharing our photos and videos, and then, after some downtime, we left for another riverboat safari. While this one wasn't nearly as exciting as the one that morning, we did find a really photogenic group of Giant River Otters, and watched as one ate a fish right in front of us. That night we enjoyed a great meal on the houseboat and thought about what surprises might lay ahead for tomorrow's explorations in the heart of the Pantanal.

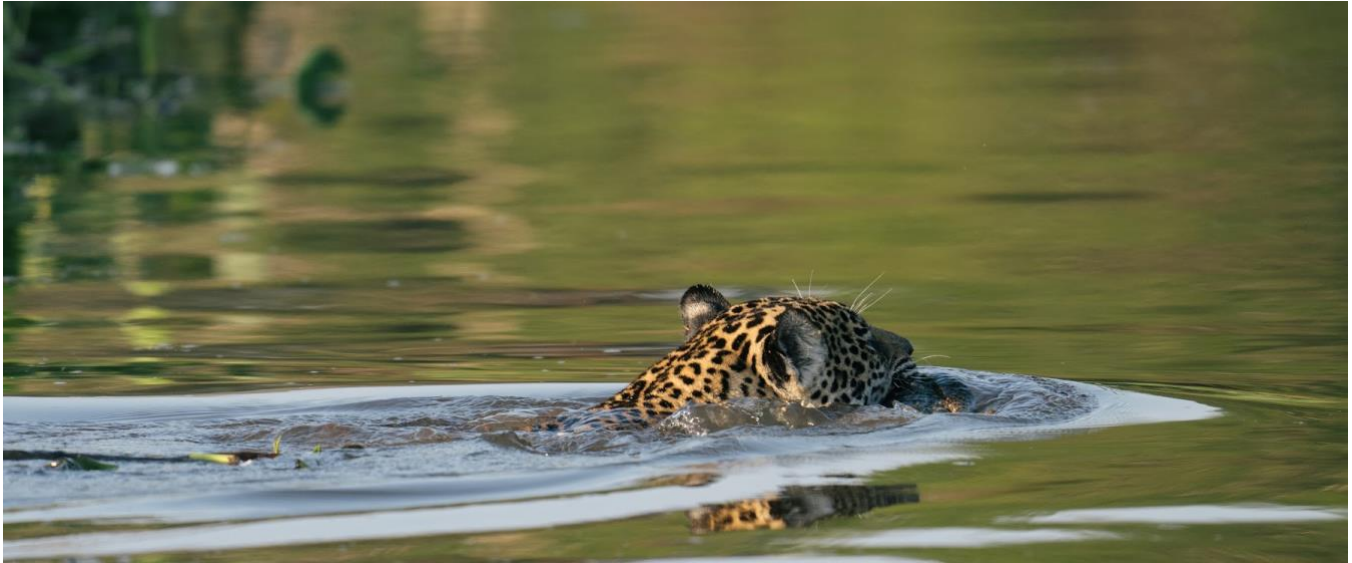
## **Sun., Sept. 17                      Departure from the Cuiaba River and Arriving at the Pixaim River**

We woke to a misty, steamy morning on the Cuiaba River, and after a quick breakfast we headed out on a sunrise Jaguar mission. We were in luck, and it didn't take long to find our first Jaguar along the river, the same female we had seen the day before, and once again she was high in a tree, actively hunting caiman. We waited for several hours until she climbed down the tree in search of another hunting platform. It wasn't the action-packed performance we'd witnessed the prior day, but we did have the opportunity to get really beautiful photos of her while she was relaxing in the tree above the still waters. We followed her for a bit longer before moving on. We watched as a Jabiru collected material for a nest, and a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture came to the side of the river for a drink of water.

After birding for a while, we returned to the area where we had seen the Jaguar and once again found her hunting for caiman. We paused for a few more pictures and then left her alone. On the way back to the houseboat, we stumbled upon another Jaguar that was slowly patrolling the vegetation along the riverbank. Our boat driver informed us that this was a new Jaguar in the area, and that she appeared to be pregnant. It was a fitting send off for this part of the trip, and we headed back to the houseboat to pack up for our return to Porto Jofre.

Once back in the van, the sleepiness from the heat set in, and many of the group napped most of the way down to the Mato Grosso Hotel on the Pixaim River. Once we arrived, we checked in and some went for a short walk to inspect the ponds near the hotel in hopes of seeing a South American tapir. While the large mammals were not present, we did see a male Greater Rhea with about 10 recently fledged chicks in tow.





That night, after dinner at the hotel, we were lucky to see a group of tapirs that were eating mangoes from the trees in front of the hotel! Laura especially had this animal on her list, and had missed the tapir in Aguapé, so she was thrilled at this chance to see them. After everyone had the chance to watch and photograph the tapirs, we loaded into a safari vehicle and set out on a spotlighting expedition, and once again we were fortunate to have some amazing sightings. We came across the tapir family again, then found a Tropical Screech-Owl, some nightjars and an ocelot! Seeing an ocelot in the wild is never easy, and we all drove back to the hotel with big smiles on our faces.

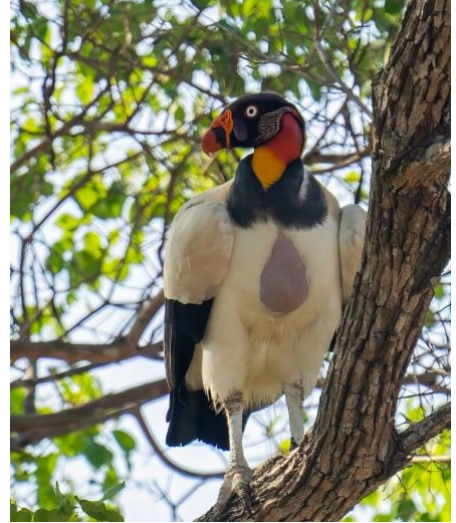
### **Mon., Sept. 18                      Full Day at Mato Grosso Hotel**

Another early morning, this time to explore a new river system, the Pixaim River. We had many targets on this safari including Giant River Otters, Agami Heron, Zigzag Heron, and two kingfishers we had yet to see. It wasn't long until we came upon a group of Giant River Otters. They approached the boat and the driver tossed them a couple fish, which they quickly devoured and moved on. This was followed by a brief sighting of a Green-and-rufous Kingfisher. We were also thrilled to get a good sighting of a Cream-colored Woodpecker and many other birds. The Pixaim River has a very different feel to it, and the group really enjoyed this new experience.

It was very hot, so we opted to relax in the middle of the day, lounging in our rooms or swimming in the pool. But there's never a dull moment in the Pantanal! We had a brief glimpse of a yellow anaconda, and Wes caught a parrot snake outside his room and showed the group the small, brightly colored snake. We also had a quick sighting of a giant ameiva, generally an easy lizard to see, but not on this tour.

After dinner we boarded the boats for one last river safari. Here we were rewarded with great looks at an Agami Heron, and saw an American Pygmy-Kingfisher! The entire boat ride delivered surprise after surprise, but little did we know our biggest surprise was still yet to come on the night safari.

Back in the safari vehicle, we had another brief sighting of the tapirs, then set out to do some night spotting. We only had one spotlight, and as Wes and Marco scanned the roadsides, Diana suddenly yelled that she had seen an ocelot. We backed the truck up to get a better view and discovered it was actually an adult Jaguar! This Jaguar seemed much less habituated to humans than others we had seen, and it immediately ran away. We saw some crab eating foxes, a pauraque, a Boat-billed Heron and a night-heron. On our return, Wes spotted the Jaguar walking down the road, and once again it quickly disappeared into the vegetation. But as we got closer,



we were treated to a good look at its face before it completely disappeared. As we sat in the dark listening for any sounds of movement, we heard a Jaguar bellowing not far away. What an amazing experience glimpsing and hearing this apex predator in the inky darkness.

## **Tues., Sept. 19                      Leaving Mato Grosso Hotel and Back to Cuiaba**

After waking up to some delicious Brazilian coffee and eating a last breakfast in the country, we loaded into the van and drove off for Cuiaba. On our way we had the chance to get great photos of a Toco Toucan and spotted an absolutely gorgeous King Vulture on the side of the road near a cow carcass. It was a fitting last sighting for us as we crossed back onto pavement and returned to civilization. The Pantanal had been very kind to this group with amazing sightings of some of the most beautiful and majestic wildlife on earth, and it is surely a trip that we all will remember for the rest of our lives.

*Jaguar (Wes Larson - WL), Capuchin Family (WL), Red-breasted Toucan (WL), Blue-throated & Red-throated Piping Guan (WL), Agami Heron (WL), Caiman with Butterflies (WL), Black-and-white Tegu (Laura Jelemensky - LJ), Violet-capped Woodnymph (WL), Saffron Finch (WL), Gilt-edged Tanager (WL), Blue Dacnis (WL), Frilled Coquette (Diane Henderson - DH), Brassy-breasted Tanager (WL), Giant Anteater (DH), Golden-collared Macaws (WL), Roadside Hawk (WL), Crimson-crested Woodpecker (WL), Jabiru Stork (WL), Chestnut-eared Aracari (WL), Red-legged Seriema (WL), Toco Toucans (WL), Spot-backed Puffbird (LJ), Maguari Stork (LJ), Six-banded Armadillo (WL), Band-tailed Manakin (WL), Jaguar (WL), Capybara (WL), Great Potoo (WL), Sun Bittern (LJ), Whistling Heron (WL), Jabiru Stork (WL), Young Rufescent Tiger Heron (WL), Black-and-gold Howler Monkey (WL), Marsh Deer (WL), Yellow Anaconda (WL), Hyacinth Macaw (WL), Returning from a successful day in the Pantanal (LJ), Jaguar (WL), Dragonfly (LJ), Giant River Otter (WL), Capped Heron (WL), Swimming Jaguar (WL), Agami Heron (WL), Silver-beaked Tanager (WL), King Vulture (WL)*