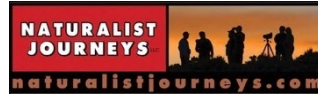
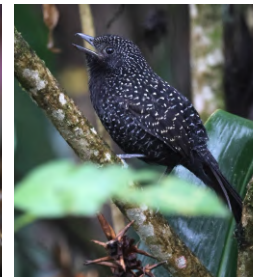


# Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars! & More | June 29 – July 13, 2024 | Trip Report | by Greg Smith



**Guides Benedito Freitas & Greg Smith with Susan & Jim, Karen & Chuck, Jeandre & Kevin, Anindya, Cliff and Raj**



## **Sun., Jun. 29**

### **Arrivals | Cantareira State Park**

Most arrived in São Paulo during the early morning today and had a little bit of time to rest up before we headed out on a 2.5-hour birding walk through Cantareira State Park. With Jorge as our local guide, we were able to find 25 different species, including: Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Purple-throated Euphonia, Squirrel Cuckoo and White-spotted Woodpecker.

Back to the hotel for a quick clean up and then we enjoyed our first meal together as a group at the Marriott Hotel.

## **Mon., June 30 – Wed., July 3**

### **Pre-tour Extension to Atlantic Forest**

From São Paulo it was a four-hour drive to the northeast and Brazil's first national park, Itatiaia. The Park was created in the thirties to help protect the Atlantic Forest with its high endemism rate and forested hills. The drive went quickly and we entered the park by 1030 that morning.

The Atlantic Forest is all about birds and the community of vegetation that supports all the diversity of the area. Suffice it to say that there was very little unvegetated ground, which made for non-stop birding. Our lodging at



Hotel do Ype had a stunning array of feeders which treated us to Chestnut-bellied Euphonia, Green Headed-Tanager and Swallow-tailed Hummingbird during our pre-lunch arrival.

It was after lunch that we did our first foray into the Forest. Vines, palms, and other trees covered the hills surrounding the hotel, and there were plenty of birds to find. Highlights from this first afternoon were Black-eared Fairy, White-spotted Woodpecker, Cobalt-rumped Parrotlet, Star-throated Antwren and Scalloped Woodcreeper.

The next morning, we birded the road over to the old Hotel Simone which had some clouds somewhat obscuring the top of the structure, but not enough clouds to prevent us from seeing the Bat Falcon perched on top. This hilltop has number of abandoned mansions from the early timber and mining barons who used this a location to get away from the lower elevation heat. Even with these structures, the forest was closing in and starting to engulf them. And that quickly becomes habitat for birds like Brazilian Tanager, Large-tailed Antshrike, White-barred Piculet and Maroon-bellied Parakeet. It took a bit to pry us away from all these goodies, but lunch was waiting for us a couple of kilometers away.

We then birded the road down to the Park's Entrance Station and then out to grounds around the military base outside the park. As soon as we were out of the van, we heard Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper, more and better looks at Brazilian Tanager, Swallow-tailed Manakin and heard our first Bellbird, the Bare-throated. Finishing up the morning with rain that continued thru the afternoon only allowed us to get quick peeks between the showers of the birds that were visiting the feeders. We used this time to discuss speciation, name changes and some of the ways to beat the challenges of tall canopy birding.

The rain let up enough at night so that we could do a little owling. And we were able to get long, satisfying looks at the resident pair of Tawny-browed Owl. A great way to finish the day!

Our final full day took us to the high country on a road that was further to the southeast. Amazing start to our birding after some very good Brazilian espresso. Our first stop in the brilliant early morning light was at the base of the high country road and provided us with great looks at Diademed, Brassy-breasted and Fawn-breasted Tanagers along with Greenish Elaenia, Variable Antshrike and Golden-winged Cacique





Further up the road we had both Buff-throated and Bay-chested Warbling Finches, along with Short-tailed and White-tailed Hawks. Black-and-Gold Cotinga up in the Araucaria trees, joined by the Araucaria Spintail and a surprise, the Itatiaia Spinetail. The top of the peak had burned six weeks earlier, but we still had a flock of six Campo Flickers and a Great Pampa Finch to add to our list. We did get Rusty barred Owl back down where we started the drive earlier this morning, again with great views.

In the morning we did bird our way out of the park, stopping along the road and then birding at Hotel Donati. Species we saw were Red-breasted Toucan, Blue-billed Tyrant and Chestnut-crowned Becard. We had a second excellent guide (Silvander) during our time in the Forest and he suggested we follow him down the highway to the Canas Marsh, so glad we did! We had a number of new seedeaters, but the highlight was a pair of mating and displaying Streamer-tailed Tyrants. What a show and what a fine way to end this part of our tour.

We had 165 different species during our time in the Atlantic Forest...

## **Thurs., July 4 – Sun., July 7**

## **Aguape Pousada**

Today we started early and flew to Campo Grande, located in the Southern Pantanal. We ended up spending four days and three nights at Aguape Pousada, a ranch well known for its wildlife and birds. We had a three-hour drive to the turnoff from the main highway and started our fifty kilometer drive down the well-kept gravel Road. There was a lot of anticipation as this was our first of four different locations where we would stay during our exploration of the Brazil's world-famous Pantanal.

And the anticipation was richly rewarded! As we turned off from a paved to a gravel road our first birds were a group of three Red-legged Seriemas. Friends to all the ranchers for their snake-eating capabilities, these lengthy-legged birds patrolled pastures and weren't shy about making their presence known. All three of these individuals climbed to the tops of termite mounds and started giving their classic honk call for all the world to hear. Pretty cool!

But really, the highlight of this drive was that we found eight different Giant Anteaters along the way. Some were distant and some were within 30m of us, but none of them seemed the least bit disturbed as they ambled along foraging as they moved. To see so many of this iconic species within a 50 km drive was lucky, amazing and just plain fortunate. A great way to start our tour in Brazil's Pantanal!



Aguape has bird feeding stations located around the dining area and two more iconic species visit these feeders that provide palm nuts - Hyacinth and Blue-and-Gold Macaws. They would be some of the last birds taking advantage of the stations and the first to appear in the morning. No alarm clocks needed here with these two and the Buff-necked Ibis. They were joined by Bare-faced Curassows, Chaco Chachalacas, Nanday & Monk Parakeets and numerous other species. Oh, and the six-banded armadillos were batting cleanup under the feeders.

Our stay here included bird and game drives in the morning and afternoon. Morning drives would start shortly after sunrise, while afternoon drives lasted until after sunset. This gave us lots of time to explore the ranch and find the abundant bird and wildlife species that called this home.

Early mornings before sunrise brought us the morning chorus along with loads of capybaras still grazing in the fields. When you see these chubby rodents being so non-chalant with their grazing, you get the idea that there are no jaguars in the neighborhood. True!

Our two morning rides each brought us another Giant Anteater to observe and photograph, one at a relatively close range. Bird highlights of our drives in the Southern Pantanal included: White-faced Whistling-Duck, Striped Cuckoo, Gray-lined Hawk, White-wedged Piculet, Yellow-fronted Woodpecker, Green-barred Woodpecker, Red-crested Finch, Chestnut-vented Conebill, White-rumped and White-lined Tanagers, Flavescent Warbler, Yellowish Pipit, Long-billed Gnatwren, Band-tailed Manakin and Chotoy Spinetail.

## **Sun., July 7 – Mon., July 8                      Pousada Piuval**

We flew from Campo Grande to Cuiaba which put us in position to explore the Northern Pantanal and the great Transpantaneira Highway south to Porto Jofre. Pousada Piuval was a short two-hour drive from our lodging in Cuiaba, and we arrived there before lunch and with plenty of time to bird around the Pousada.

Piuval had its first jaguar sighting in 2015, which was many, many years after its last sighting. With that first the rancheria made the decision to incorporate jaguars and their presence into operating as a large cattle ranch. Rotational grazing allowed the rancheria to keep their cattle herds away from the areas where jaguars were sighted. Thereby reducing potential predation and impacts to the cattle operation. They now have at least ten different individual jaguars on the ranch and potential impacts seem to have been mitigated. Kudos to the rancheria for taking this big step into incorporating the jaguars into the operations!





And as a result of this, when we took our afternoon drives, we were alerted to the fact that if one of the ten jaguars on the ranch were spotted, we would head directly to that location. It happened both afternoons while we were out, and it was on the second afternoon that we did see a jaguar laying down alongside one of the ranch roads. He was very relaxed, and we got to watch him for about ten minutes. He then sauntered into the forest, but our guide Benedito talked with Yvan our local driver-guide and they decided to back the vehicle up to the intersection which was about fifty feet behind us. Here we were able to look down the two different roads as they felt he was just relocating to watch for prey along the roads. And they were RIGHT!

He appeared on the other road and just as casually laid down and didn't pay us any attention. But we certainly paid attention to him and were able to watch until the sun had set. Lots of wonderful observation and photograph opportunities for all of us and for the three other ranch vehicles with clients that joined us in our find. A really fine way to watch a sunset, or is it watch a jaguar...

It may sound redundant but participating in both morning and late afternoon wildlife drives provided us with new species and new behavioral observations. We cover a lot of ground mostly in vehicles, but in areas not known to be utilized by jaguars we can get out and bird. But with the caveat of having less than one arm's length distance from the people around you. In other words, a tight group as we moved along.

One of these morning outings we did get to see the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, a bird we had heard a number of times previously without getting a look. A good mix of bird species here (both morning and afternoons...) which made for some very active birding - Blue-throated Piping-Guan, Spot-tailed Nightjar, Nacunda Nighthawk, Limpkin, Sunbittern, Green Ibis, Gray-headed Kite, Blue-crowned Trogon, Black-fronted Nunbird, Crimson- and Pale-crested Woodpeckers, Planalto Slaty-Antshrike, Large-billed Antwren, Matto Grosso Antbird, Helmeted Manakin, Pearly-Vented Tody-Tyrant, Rufous Casiornis and Grayish Baywing

## **Tues., July 9 – Thurs., July 11**

## **Transpantaneira | Cuiaba River Jaguars**

This part of the trip is all about jaguars. The goal once we reach the houseboat upriver from Porto Jofre is to get out on the Rio Cuiaba and find a few of the 220 jaguars that inhabit this area. But first, we get to bird our way 140km down the Transpantaneira.



This is a gravel road that takes you down thru wetlands, creeks, grasslands and treed savannah. You know what the potential is, and it always seems to be fulfilled. And we got to do this on the 9<sup>th</sup> and then again on our return drive to our next lodging at Rio Claro on the 11<sup>th</sup>. A wonderful place to get great looks at so many of the water-dependent birds. Sharp pink and orange Roseate Spoonbills, mortician-dressed Wood Storks and tuxedo-wearing Jabiru, they were all here and in large numbers.

But we had a boat to catch, and only arrived 45-minutes late! A quick restroom break and we were headed up river to our houseboat where lunch was waiting for us, And then that group of eight giant river otters lounging on the bank caught our attention. They are big animals and to see them playing and rolling on the sandy bank made them look like overgrown kids. But lunch was waiting and off we sped upriver to lunch.

A day on the river would be moving upstream looking for a jaguar hunting the shoreline. That was until you heard the radio crackle in the back of the boat. That is always a sign that some other boat had found a jaguar and you knew the outboard motor was about to add some RPM's. Our driver-guide was born alongside the river and spent his life navigating all the channels. It would be so easy to make a wrong turn here given our unfamiliarity with the topography, but he knew it like the back of his hand.

The first river jaguar was a one of a pair of twin-brothers that were spending their first winter on their own. They always had to be looking over their shoulders for larger adult males and so were regularly seen both days hunting the shoreline. One of them was swimming across the channel ahead of us.

Nest sightings were of a large and then a small female. It was a sunny blue-sky day and these spotted cats were in their element. It is the third largest cat in the world with adults weighing between 200 and 350 pounds. When they laid down in the grass, it really was a challenge to make out their features with the spotted patterns (each cat has a different array of spots on their face, it is their fingerprint!

This first afternoon we saw three different cats, while the following morning we had two additional different animals as well as some of the same individuals from yesterday. During the second afternoon we had many sightings, two of which were new individuals. All told for our time on the river we had seven different individuals and eleven sighting of jaguars. Check out these photos!





Some of the birds we found that were new to us for these dates included: Blue-gray Saltator, Gray-crested Cacholote, Greater Thornbird, Rusty-backed Spintail, Cinereous-breasted Spintail, Blue-crowned Parakeet, Great Horned Owl, Crane Hawk, White-tailed Goldenthrroat and Band-tailed Nighthawk.

### **Fri., July 12 – Sat., July 13                      Rio Claro**

We arrived at Rio Claro after birding our way back up the Transpantaneira. This lodge is known for its boats rides as well as its wildlife and bird drives thru the area’s waterways and forests. The night drives gave us good looks at crab-eating foxes, Common Paraque and Spot-tailed Nightjar, while the three different boats outings were for birding and looking for the Agami Heron and the Zig-Zag Heron in the dense understory that lined the river. We certainly gave the search for both our best shot but did not find either species. But we did get a straight flush with the kingfishers seeing all five species here.

There were a few new birds here: Sungrebe, Boat-billed Heron, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, Black-crowned Tityra and three in our group during and after lunch outing had a tamandua crossing the road in front of them!

### **Departures**

We checked out of Rio Claro this morning and did some birding as we headed back to Cuiaba, but couldn’t turn up anything new. But we did have one last fine meal at a well-known churrascaria before going our separate ways and boarding our flights to São Paulo. We did find 333 bird species and 24 different mammal species, a fine trip to one of the world’s treasures, Brasil’s Pantanal...

*Photos: Jaguar (Raj Naraparaju - RN), Toco Toucan (Clifford Drowley - CD), Hyacinth Macaws (CD), Giant Anteater (Anindya Sen - AS), Green-headed Tanager (AS), Long-tailed Antshrike (CD), Saffron Finch (RN), Black-goggled Tanager (AS), Blue Dacnis (RN), Violet-capped Woodnymph (RN), Red Howler Monkey (RN), Plush-crested Jay (CD), Sunbittern (CD), Red-crested Cardinal (CD), Red-legged Seriema (AS), Hyacinth Macaw (CD), Caiman (RN), Roseate Spoonbill (CD), Jaguar (RN), Great Horned Owl (RN), Jaguar (RN), Black-crowned Night Heron (RN), Squirrel Cuckoo (CD), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (RN), Pied Lapwing (RN), Southern Crested Caracara (CD), Giant River Otter (RN), Capped Heron (RN), Azara’s Capuchin (RN), Rufescent Tiger Heron (CD), Black-collared Hawk (RN), Black-and-gold Howler Monkey (RN), Blue-and-gold Macaws (CD), Surucua Trogon (CD)*