

# Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars! And More...

## July 3 – 13, 2025 | Trip Report

### by Carlos Sanchez



**Carlos Sanchez, Xavier Munoz, and 9 trip participants:**  
**Sharon, Claudia, Barbara, Heather, Mark, Charles, Sherri, Sherry, and Andrew**



### **July 3 - 4                      Journey to Aguape | Giant Anteaters!**

Our group arrived from São Paulo and convened at the Hotel DeVille in Campo Grande, where we enjoyed a relaxing evening of introductions over caipirinhas and a delicious welcome dinner. Xavier Munoz gave us a summary of the tour itinerary about what to expect over the coming days. Spirits were high as we looked forward to the adventures ahead.



Following breakfast, we set out on our journey to Aguapé Lodge, located in the southern Pantanal. The roughly four-hour drive offered an exciting introduction to the region's wildlife, with memorable sightings of Giant Anteater, Greater Rhea, and Red-legged Seriema along the roadside. Upon arrival at the lodge, we were warmly greeted not just by staff, but by an impressive cast of local wildlife already active around the grounds. Nanday Parakeets chattered from the trees while Hyacinth Macaw, the world's largest parrot, flashed their electric-blue plumage in the early afternoon sun. A small army of Six-banded Armadillo frequented the feeders by the kitchen. It was clear we had arrived somewhere special. That afternoon, we embarked on our first safari drive and were rewarded with a remarkable number of Giant Anteater sightings, a total of eight individuals, as well as two Southern Tamandua, a smaller and more arboreal relative.

The day concluded with a hearty buffet dinner back at the lodge. We enjoyed traditional farofa (toasted cassava flour), feijão (black beans), rice, fresh salads, grilled beef, and other regional specialties, a delicious end to an exhilarating first full day in the Pantanal.

## **July 5                      Rhythm of the Southern Pantanal at Aguape**

The day began with a fantastic buffet breakfast, a spread that included tropical fruits, fresh-baked pão de queijo (cheese bread), scrambled eggs, homemade cakes, local jams, and strong Brazilian coffee. Outside the dining area, the feeders at Aguapé Lodge were alive with activity. Plush-crested Jays darted between branches, squabbling playfully with Nanday Parakeets, while Red-crested Cardinals, Giant Cowbirds, and even a pair of Blue-and-yellow Macaws made appearances. For many in the group, it was hard to leave the shaded veranda, as the birding was already well underway before the safari even began.

Our morning game drive took us through the varied habitats surrounding the lodge. The southern Pantanal at this time of year reveals a distinctive mosaic: expanses of dry grassland, dotted with scattered trees, shrubs, and ephemeral ponds in varying states of retreat as the dry season progresses. These drying wetlands concentrate wildlife, and we were rewarded with excellent views of Whistling Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, White Woodpecker, White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, and Yellowish Pipit. The afternoon safari brought new highlights: a stately Pampas Deer, often elusive in midday heat, posed beautifully for photos; a tiny White-wedged Piculet worked the branches of a low tree; and both Golden-green Woodpecker and Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch made memorable appearances.

By dinner, laughter and shared stories filled the dining area as we refueled on another delicious meal featuring grilled meats, creamy polenta, sautéed vegetables, rice, and a tangy maracujá (passionfruit) mousse for dessert. What an amazing first full day. The Pantanal was already working its magic.





## **July 6                      Boat Trip on the Aquidauana River | Flight to Cuiabá**

Our final day at Aguapé Lodge offered a rich and rewarding conclusion to our time in the southern Pantanal. We set out in the morning for a boat excursion along the Aquidauana River, a lifeline of the region that weaves through forested banks and open wetlands, supporting a broad diversity of flora and fauna.

Early in the journey, we were thrilled to encounter and photograph a Blaze-winged Parakeet, a species with a limited range, almost entirely restricted to Mato Grosso do Sul. The brilliant green plumage, fiery wings, and loud calls made this regional specialty a favorite among the group. As we navigated through patches of gallery forest, lush corridors of vegetation hugging the riverbanks, we experienced a new habitat for the first time on the tour. Highlights of the boat ride included both Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers diving for prey, a perched Great Black Hawk watching the river intently, a dazzling Rufous-tailed Jacamar, and a delightful surprise in the form of a Band-tailed Manakin, a fiery little jewel of a bird, flashing through the understory like a living ember. After lunch and a final walk around the lodge grounds, we bid farewell to Aguapé and began the return drive to Campo Grande. The ride was smooth and uneventful, with the group already reminiscing about our favorite sightings and special moments from the past few days. Our evening flight brought us northward to Cuiabá, gateway to the northern Pantanal.

## **July 7                      Transpantaneira Highway | Aymara Lodge Canoe Paddle**

After a delicious breakfast at Amazonia Hotel, we made a brief morning excursion to Parque Bernardo Berneck, a small but biodiverse city park nestled in the town of Várzea Grande. Despite its proximity to the city, this remnant of seasonally dry forest proved to be a gem. Highlights included Green Ibis, Golden-green Woodpecker, White-wedged Piculet, Orange-backed Troupial, and the colorful Gray-headed Tanager. But it was the curious and sociable Black-tailed Marmosets, small, dark-furred primates with alert eyes and soft vocalizations, that stole the show.

With spirits high and eyes sharp, we began our journey southward, a relatively short two-hour drive that brought us into the northern reaches of the Pantanal proper. As soon as we entered the floodplain, the shift in scenery was immediate and exhilarating. Herons, egrets, Jabirus, jacanas, kites, and kingfishers filled the roadside wetlands in staggering numbers. Even seasoned travelers in our group found themselves marveling at the sheer density and variety of birdlife.



By midday, we arrived at Aymara Lodge, our comfortable base for the next two nights. The lodge features spacious rooms, friendly staff, and a peaceful ambiance that quickly won over the group. After settling in and enjoying a light lunch, we took to the water again, this time in canoes, for a gentle paddle along the slow-flowing river that borders the lodge grounds. The late afternoon light was golden and serene as we glided quietly between overhanging branches and soft-edged riverbanks. Among our sightings were a regal Black-collared Hawk and a jewel-like American Pygmy Kingfisher. The pace was easy and the company enjoyable. As the sun set, we gathered in the open-air dining area for a round of caipirinhas and ice-cold local beers, trading stories and laughter.

## **July 8                      Wetlands of Aymara | South American Tapir**

We focused our morning efforts along the entrance road to Aymara Lodge, a quietly magical stretch bordered by seasonal wetlands teeming with life. These wetlands played host to gatherings of Yacare Caiman and a splendid diversity of waterbirds. Among the new additions to our growing list were the elegant Sunbittern, the striking Capped Heron, the diminutive Chestnut-vented Conebill, and the subtle Bluish-gray Saltator, each bringing fresh excitement to the morning's tally. Towering above them all, both in size and stature, were the majestic Jabirus, standing sentinel-like in the shallows, the emblematic giants of the Pantanal.

In the late afternoon, we embarked on a safari drive into a neighboring fazenda, where the mix of gallery forest and open fields revealed a vibrant community of new birds, including Chestnut-eared Aracari, Helmeted Manakin, and (a cousin of the Ivory-billed) Crimson-crested Woodpecker hammering away at a snag. But it was the appearance of a South American Tapir that truly stole the show. This shy and elusive creature, South America's largest native land mammal, stepped into view with quiet confidence, lingering long enough for everyone to get clear looks and photos. With its distinctive prehensile snout, gentle eyes, and thick barrel-like frame, the tapir left quite the impression! As dusk crept in, a Marsh Deer appeared along the road on our way back, their large ears twitching as they watched us pass.

## **July 9                      Campos do Jofre | First Jaguars on the Cuiabá**

Departing from Aymara Lodge after a final hearty breakfast and some fond farewells, we continued our journey south along the iconic Transpantaneira Highway. As the wooden bridges clattered beneath our wheels, we paused at Hotel Pantanal Mato Grosso, a lush riverside stop where the grain feeders and lush trees attracted an entertaining cast of avian visitors. Among them were Blue-crowned Parakeet, Grayish Baywing, and the occasional Rufous Cacholote.



Continuing southward into increasingly open terrain, we entered the vast grasslands of the Campos do Jofre, where the road was flanked by wide horizons. Here we encountered the comically disproportionate yet undeniably charismatic Southern Screamers, striding through the wet grass like prehistoric sentinels. Their guttural calls echoed over the flats, lending an almost surreal soundtrack to the midday heat. By late afternoon, we arrived at Porto Jofre and boarded boats for the final leg of our journey, a gentle cruise downriver to our comfortable Panoramico floatel, nestled amid the riverbanks and surrounded by the lush tapestry of the northern Pantanal. The anticipation was palpable. For many, this region is synonymous with one animal above all: Jaguar. And fortune smiled on us. Within hours of settling in, we were back on the water for an afternoon exploration, and there, on a sunlit bank, lay our first Jaguar. Cameras clicked and binoculars locked in, but for a while, silence reigned on the boat, only broken by whispered exclamations. It was a thrilling prelude to the days of river exploration to come.

## **July 10                      So Many Jaguars on the Cuiabá | Brazilian Biogeography**

It was a spectacular day on the Cuiabá River, where we spent the full day exploring its sinuous channels in search of wildlife. The Cuiabá, one of the great arteries of the northern Pantanal, winds its way through a mosaic of flooded forest, gallery woodland, and open sandbanks. And the Jaguars did not disappoint. We enjoyed multiple encounters throughout the day, each one a thrill. These are the largest Jaguars in the Americas! Unlike their more elusive Amazonian cousins, the Jaguars of the Pantanal are accustomed to boats, offering exceptional opportunities for observation and photography.

Along the riverbanks, a busy avian cast played out: Pied Lapwings strutted boldly across the sand, while Large-billed and Yellow-billed Terns hovered and dipped with aerodynamic grace. In denser riverside vegetation, we spotted a Rufous-tailed Jacamar gleaming like a jewel and the ever-vocal Black-capped Donacobius calling in duets. Kingfishers, herons, and raptors were constant companions throughout. One of the day's most heartwarming highlights was a close encounter with a Giant Otter family. These intelligent, social mammals are endangered throughout much of their range. After a rich and wildlife-filled day, we returned to the floatel where I presented a short evening talk on the biogeography of Brazil. Tracing the evolutionary threads that weave together the Pantanal, Cerrado, Amazon, and Atlantic Forest, we gained a deeper appreciation for the remarkable diversity we'd been witnessing—and the forces that shaped it.





## July 11 Giant Otter | Pixaim River | Avian Taxonomy Powerpoint

Our final morning on the Cuiabá River began with a last boat excursion, a chance for one more encounter with the magnificent Jaguars that had defined our time in this wild corridor. The Pantanal held true to its magic, offering up glimpses of these remarkable cats in the soft light of early day. From there, we journeyed northward, retracing our route through the heart of the Pantanal as we made our way back to SouthWild Pantanal Lodge on the Pixaim River. The drive itself was rich with surprises: a dazzling Fork-tailed Woodnymph shimmered at a roadside stop, and we were fortunate to spot a Yellow Anaconda sunning itself near the track, an incredible reptile that all desired to see well (and we did!).

Once settled back into the comforts of SouthWild, we set out on another afternoon boat ride along the shaded banks of the Pixaim. Here the character of the river was different, quieter, more intimate, and the wildlife responded in kind. A White-throated Piping-Guan flapped clumsily across the canopy, while Greater Ani and Black-fronted Nunbird made their presence known in the riverside thickets. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike sang from overhead, its voice a curious blend of sharpness and melody. A favorite moment for many came when we encountered a semi-habituated Black-collared Hawk. With practiced grace, it swooped down to snatch fish tossed from the boat and offered an up-close look at one of the Pantanal's iconic raptors.

That evening, I was asked to present on avian taxonomy, a subject that, for many, can feel fragmented and constantly shifting. I spoke about the evolution of classification systems, from morphological groupings to modern molecular phylogenies, and shared the cognitive strategies I use to retain and integrate vast amounts of ornithological information. It's less memorization, more pattern recognition, a living system I carry into the field every day. The group responded with enthusiasm, many noting how it illuminated their experience of birding throughout the trip. It was a reminder that knowledge, when offered generously, becomes a bridge and not a barrier.

## July 12 SouthWild Gallery Forest | Ocelot

Our last full day in the Pantanal began at dawn along the gallery forest trails that wind beside the Pixaim River. This dense and dynamic habitat revealed one final burst of diversity, reminding us just how saturated with life the Pantanal remains. We picked up around fifteen new bird species over the course of the morning, an impressive tally for a final day. Among the highlights were Pale-crested Woodpecker, Green-barred Woodpecker, and Planalto Slaty-Antshrike each striking and beautiful in their own way. Mato Grosso Antbird,



Streaked Xenops, White-lored Spinetail, and White-winged Becard each emerged with almost teasing appearances among the various feeding flocks we encountered, while a Tropical Parula flashed a final dash of blue and gold – a last day callback to a bird familiar to many back home. Brown Capuchin and Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys watched us from near the forest tower, bearing witness to our explorations.

After another delicious lunch at SouthWild Pantanal, we took a short break during the heat of the day before setting off once more into the open scrub forest beyond the gallery woods. Rufous-fronted Thornbird, Bare-faced Curassow, and even a graceful Marsh Deer rounded out our afternoon sightings. However, it was the early evening that gave us the grand finale, the crescendo of our Pantanal trip. An Ocelot stepped confidently into view and lingered long enough for every member of the group to take in its exquisite markings back in the gallery forest property of the lodge. Elegant, elusive, and fully aware of its audience, the cat seemed a perfect ambassador its species as it is normally very difficult to see on a short visit such as this one.

## July 13                      One Last Look

Our final morning allowed for a bit of early birding, one last chance to absorb the rhythms of the Pantanal before we returned to the clocks and calendars of daily life. After a sumptuous Brazilian breakfast, complete with fresh tropical fruits and the now-familiar breakfast bolo (cake), we made our way north toward Cuiabá. By midday, we reached the city. Three of us were dropped off at the Amazonia Hotel to await our flights back to the United States, carrying with us not just photographs and checklists, but something more difficult to articulate: the synthesis of wildlife and landscapes into a lived, enriching experience. I thank everyone who brought curiosity and generosity of spirit on this Pantanal tour.

*Photos: Group (Carlos Sanchez - CS), Orange-cheeked Parrot (Mark Abdy - MA), Blue-and-yellow Macaw (MA), Giant Anteater (MA), Capybara (CS), Plush-crested Jay (Sharon Blakely - SB), Toco Toucan (MA), Pied Lapwing (MA), Capped Heron (MA), Chestnut-eared Aracari (MA), Caiman (SB), Rufescent Tiger Heron (MA), Jabiru (MA), Jaguar (SB), Amazon Kingfisher (CS), Jaguar (SB), Giant Otter (MA), Pale-crested Woodpecker (MA), Ocelot (MA), Red-necked Aracari (MA), Blackish Nightjar (MA)*