

Brazil's Pantanal — Jaguars & More!: Trip Report July 15 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Greg Smith



With guides Xavier Muñoz & Greg Smith, and participants Janet, Terry, Claudia, Susan & Martin, Tere, Bill & Sue, and Ann & Jim

Saturday, 15 July São Paulo

Some of us arrived for the first time into São Paulo, while the remainder arrived later in the day after finishing the Atlantic Forest pre-extension where they had 155 species. After introductions and directions for the following day, we all enjoyed a leisurely dinner together and then headed back to our rooms to prepare for the PANTANAL!!!

Sunday, 16 July São Paulo / Cuiaba / Pousada Piuval

Up early for breakfast and then off to the airport, as we had places to go! Our flight was on time and we landed in Cuiaba, the journey begins.

Once we hit the dirt road we started to see more water. And more water means more birds with our first highlight being a Whistling Heron on an old fence post right next to the road. And for all of us, it gave one of its peculiar whistle calls.

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We drove another fifteen kilometers and then turned into Pousada Piuval where we unloaded our gear and hopped onto a tractor that took us along the edge of the wetlands where we got good looks at Brazilian Teal, Scarlet-headed Blackbird, and lots of caiman.

But we weren't done, as we jumped into a truck fifteen minutes after getting back and headed off for a night drive! With crab-eating foxes and raccoons running around, we were surprised to also see Great Potoo, Tropical Screech Owl, and Common Parakeet. Certainly a great way to finish our first day.



Monday, 17 July **Pousada Pouso Alegre**

We drove and hiked as we birded the morning at Piuval. Lots of Greater Rhea, Southern Screamer, and different ibises were using the lands of this huge ranch. The highlight was probably the pair of Sun Bittern that fed fairly close to us, although the number of Snail Kites was boggling!

It was only 35 kilometers to Pousada Pouso Alegre, so this allowed quite a bit of time to walk and bird the long, private road to the

lodge. Coal-crested Finch and Red-billed Scythebill were two of the highlights, and as we neared the lodge, those magical birds, the Hyacinth Macaws came screaming overhead!

The lodge rooms were basic, but *very* clean. One of the things that made this lodge so special (beyond the wildlife and vistas) was the lodge's attention to small details. They regularly patched the potholes on the entrance road, they had barriers attached to the bottom of the room doors that prevented anything on the ground from getting into the room, the food was very good by Pantanal standards, with eggplant in the lasagna and kiwi in the green salad. If something did not work in your room (which was unusual), they had it fixed in five minutes. Isolated and remote, it was everyone's favorite place.

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Tuesday, 18 July

Pousada Pouso Alegre

We were up early the next morning for a pre-breakfast drive in an open-air truck with a canopy. We birded along, finding Surucua Trogon, Black-backed Nunbird, and Rufous-tailed Jacamar. Mammals included lots of collared peccary, black-striped tufted capuchin, red brocket deer, and two Tamandua. Some trees were starting to flower, a sign that spring was coming, and an attractant for a lot of birds. We finished with a run down caiman alley before heading back for a late breakfast.



Time was always spent around the feeders where we found Toco Toucan, Chestnut-billed Aracari, and loads of flycatchers and doves. Most times in the morning, there was a flock of about sixty-five Yellow-billed Brazilian Cardinals on the ground and in the trees. Oh, and at all times of day there were a few of those gaudy macaws hanging out.



We spent the rest of the day birding, taking a night drive and the mandatory siesta. When the birds shut down, there was really nothing else we should do but join them.



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Wednesday, 19 July

Pousada Pouso Alegre to Cuiaba River

We did one more loop around the area and out onto the boardwalks where we found Great Antshrike, the always loud Rufous Hornero, and more Snail Kites than you would believe (whose favorite delicacies were red crabs and snails). Then we loaded up Jose's bus and started the drive to the banks of the Cuiaba River.

A stop at the Mato Grosso lodge for lunch and a little birding, which turned up Boat-billed Heron, Black Skimmer, and a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl

which had just captured a brown and beige bird with two wingbars. We still had some more driving ahead of us, so off we went.

We stopped at a piece of the of the huge Pantanal wetlands that was mostly treeless; here we found a flock of about twenty-five Necunda Nighthawks, Yellow-throated Spinetail, and a pair of Great Horned Owl.

Southern Crested Caracara were building their nest, the herds of Snail Kite were either foraging or digesting, and jacamars put in another appearance. We drove the last few kilometers to the town of Porto Jofre where our two boats were waiting for us.



We loaded up and enjoyed the sweet light just before sunset as we motored along a river that was so much smoother than the Transpantaneira we had just finished driving.

Thursday, 20 July & Friday, 21 July Cuiaba River

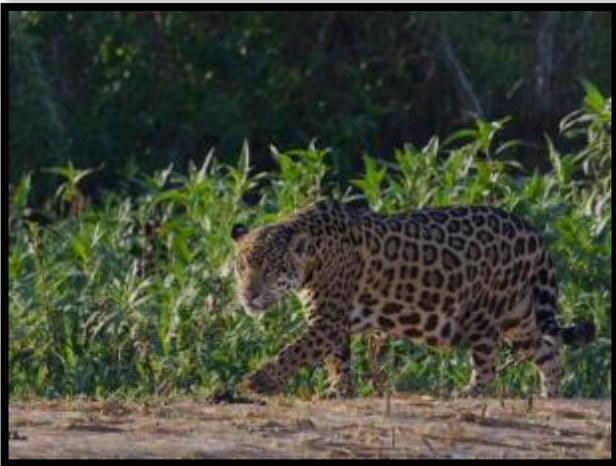
We had to be on the water before sunrise, so breakfast was at 6:00 AM, where we saw Venus align itself very close to the setting moon. A dramatic setting as we finished breakfast and then found ourselves skimming along in the cool air by 6:30.

We strained our eyes into the early morning shadows looking for those eyes of fire. Truly a challenge to pick them out as we motored up the river. But the great thing about this area, and about the visitors that want to view the jaguars, is that they are with professionals who have that search image. Who communicate with radios so that everyone who is looking gets an opportunity to see the third largest cat in the world! So with

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that in mind, our driver Edmo put the radio down and said get ready, and then we were off.

The adrenaline from the thought of seeing one of these big cats was only enhanced as our twelve-passenger boat leaped into high gear and tore through the water. We weren't the fastest boat and we



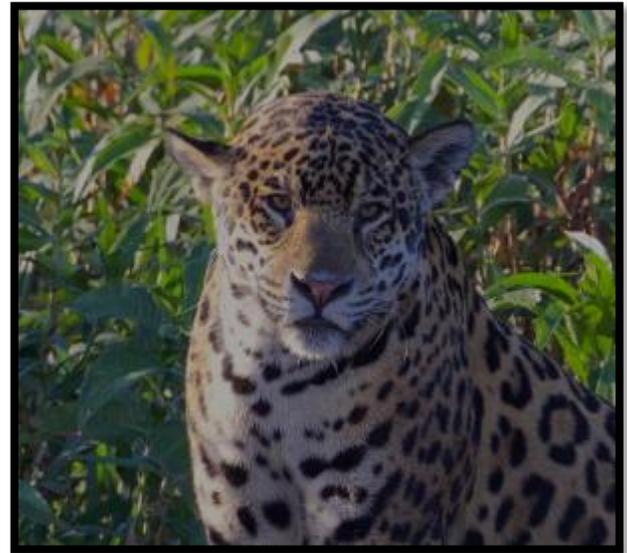
weren't the slowest, but still it took about 6.5 minutes to reach the location of this jaguar. And still the cat was hard to find, a testament to those unique spots, and colors, and the dapped shade. But Edmo saw it immediately and made sure all of us got our eyes on the big female. She was hunting the riverside, shifting slowly along, pausing to listen and check for scent. We, and a number of other small boats, stayed a respectful distance away and slowly motored upstream as she moved in that direction.

We got to watch her for about forty minutes before she disappeared, and then everyone just started looking at their pictures. There were lots of smiles as she was so very cooperative. But it was still only a little after 8:30 AM, and we had until lunchtime before returning to our floating hotel, so we went back to searching for our own cat.

We didn't get very far when the next radio message came in that there was a male on another fork of the river! We got there in time to watch this male hunt the riverbank for about fifteen minutes before disappearing into the forest. Two jaguars!!!

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After lunch, we enjoyed the mandatory siesta (birds, jaguars, and everything else just shuts down from about noon to 3:00 PM). So, we headed out at 3:00 PM and then heard three more reports of jaguar. We got to see all of them, but no jaguar in its right mind is going to do anything but lay down in the cool shade when the ambient temperature is over 90°. So, we got to see these cats, but all were giving us their best example of resting.



At 6:30 AM the next day we were headed back up river looking for more jaguars. We did some birding, getting looks at different tyrannulets and other birds when the first call came over the radio. We were becoming very fond of these mad dashes in which we saw a jaguar every time, except once. This cat was another mature female, but not as heavy as the first. But this cat also wanted leisure time during her hunting and took the opportunity to lie out on a sandy beach, stretch, roll on her back, and give herself a little cleaning for about fifteen minutes. Then just as casually, she rose and started working her way back up stream to hunt. We watched her for about seventy-five minutes, an incredible treat!



We saw two more cats this morning, both just before lunch, and they too decided it was siesta time. We also got some very good looks at a Brazilian porcupine, something we never thought we would see. With its nearly 20-inch prehensile tail lying along the branch behind it, it was poised on a branch sitting erect. We also had at least a dozen Giant River Otters, most of which were very chatty when they got close to us. What a great finish to our time on the river ... eight, yes eight jaguar sightings in one and a half days! But now it was time for lunch and then our drive to SouthWild to see what we could find.



Saturday 22 July & Sunday, 23 July SouthWild

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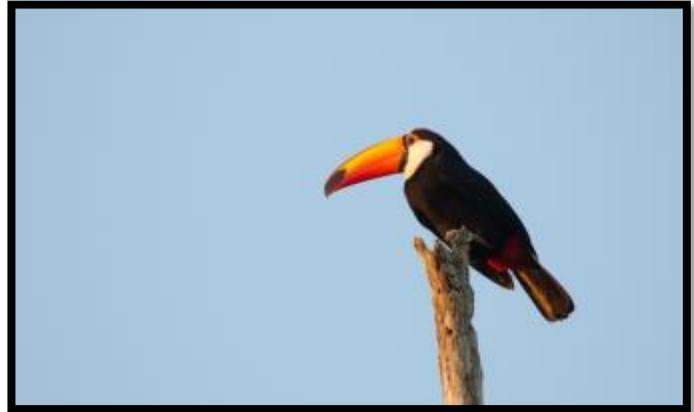
The drive to SouthWild was the same distance as from our lunch break on the way out to Cuiaba. The last 500 meters down the road was pretty bouncy, but we were there with enough time to take an evening boat ride on the river to look for Agami Heron. Their habit of feeding under the tangles of river's edge vegetation made for less than ideal looks, but we knew we would be coming back tomorrow. Beyond all the other herons, egrets and Neotropic Cormorants, there were loads of kingfishers, one of which

was our first Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, a handsome male.

After dinner, we headed off to the blind that SouthWild has set up to look for ocelot that would come into investigate if there was any of the local shad-like fish put out as bait. And it was our night to be fortunate as one male came in and climbed trees and vines, looking for the fish and then dropping to the ground to eat. It would always retreat after a couple of fish, and it would also return, much to everyone's enchantment. A very nice way to polish off our day.

We were up early the next morning for a walk to bird the area. One of the highlights at SouthWild was the observation tower that is about 50 feet from an active Jabiru nest. The birds were very accommodating and gave us a look at the habitat surrounding the lodge. Everyone hoped to see a Giant Anteater heading home to sleep, but not today. Instead, White Woodpecker, Bare-faced Curassow, Toco Toucan, and Hyacinth Macaw took everyone's breath away. All this before breakfast, and also before our morning boat ride.

We headed out with Gustavo and his partner in two open skiffs and watched more otters feeding before we got back on land and did a hike that gave us good looks at antbirds, trogons, and motmots. Again, a very birdy location, but we were going to head out further up the river to see if we could get better looks at Agami Heron.



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And we did! As we motored up the river, there in front of us, perched on top of some shrubs, in blazing sun was the Jimi Hendrix of herons — the electric blue and rufous Agami Heron! And it stayed long enough for everyone to get very good looks and pictures! What a stunning bird!

A little further up the river we had an American Pygmy Kingfisher, which gave us all five new world kingfishers! This, along with a bright orange butterfly that came to rest on a caiman's snout (one of the hundreds in this section of the river ...) made for a very prototypical morning! But now it was time for a siesta, as the temperatures topped 90 degrees.

The afternoon hike was to look for other primates, but apparently, they were still on siesta time. We found a Pearly-thighed Tyrannulet, along with a Rufous Gnateater, and again some more motmots. With that sweet, afternoon light setting in we could feel everything around giving a collective sigh with the suffused temperature drop.

But Xavier had one more night ride for us, so after dinner we got into a custom flatbed truck with high back bucket seats. We were going to see if we could find the Tapir that was seen two nights earlier. We hadn't been driving ten minutes when Gusaldo signaled for the truck to stop. And there, not ten feet from the side of us was a Giant Anteater ambling along in a very nonchalant manner. We got fantastic looks and then had the good fortune to see what was probably the same animal on our return as it fed on ants — WOW!!!



This was our last morning at SouthWild, and our last morning in the field for our Pantanal expedition, so what better way to feel what makes this area so special than to get back into the boats! We did, and then we got out for a loop walk where we were received by a troupe of black-striped tufted capuchins. And while they were swaying over our heads, we heard a troupe of black & gold howler monkeys screaming in the vastness of the Pantanal. But we had one more bird out here that we wanted to visit and that was the Great Potoo.

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This is a big bird and to see it in its venerable pose, emulating a broken branch stub, is always a treat. A few moved to the other side of the bird and you could see it slowly open its eyes halfway and then follow those with a micromanaged turn of its head. It was mostly a subtle gray but there were shades of



chestnut and pale auburn mixed in with this palette. What a distinguished-looking branch, and it just rounded out the day for us.

We took a quiet ride up the river to where we couldn't go any further and just attended to all the sounds around us. It was almost a refined experience as we noted all of the calls and we thought about our last ten days.

We finished lunch and headed back to Cuiaba for our farewell dinner at a very flavorful churrascaria. And the July 24 is when we all flew home.