



**Brazil: Pantanal, Caraça & Trilha dos Toucanos
Species List July 2016**

Guide Xavier Munoz of Neblina Forest, and local guides

Demis, Jose & Helen, with host Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys / Caligo Ventures.

9 participants: Don, Lindsey, Bob, Kelly, Delsie. Martyn, Belinda, Barry and Ty

Tour Report by Martyn Kenefick

This was a tour where the highlights alone were almost too numerous to mention. Our time was divided between two entirely contrasting ecosystems and their attendant wildlife. Over the course of our stay, between us we amassed a most reputable total of no less than 308 species of birds and a further 20 species of mammal.



To a large extent, this was made possible by the expert knowledge and boundless enthusiasm of Xavier, who became as much a friend as a tour leader. He simply was Mr Fix It. He personally met each and every arriving participant at Guarulhos airport, Sao Paolo. He ensured the smooth efficiency of our

nine different sets of accommodation and managed both our road and internal flight transportation seamlessly. Above all, he was great fun.

With tour participants arriving from various destinations in both the USA and the Caribbean,



the official tour did not commence until dinner-time Saturday. However for those who had arrived in Brazil early, there was an extra day's birding available, suggested by Xavier for us when we realized so many had early flights arriving.

Day (1) Saturday 16th July

A Bonus Day – Trilha dos Toucanos



Welcome to Brazil, and nothing like diving right in! As more than half the group arrived a couple nights ahead, Xavier offered us a well-crafted outing for this day.

A 5:00am start saw us driving the 190km south and then east to the Atlantic rainforest. We never saw sight of the sun today – but the birding was absolutely incredible, thanks in no small part to the expert guiding of Demis Bucci, a local expert guide.

The journey of around 3 hours saw us first negotiate the seemingly endless metropolis of Sao Paulo, a city home to some 21,000,000 people, before crossing a rather featureless landscape, finally descending in a series of sharp bends down into the rainforest, now covered in early morning mist.

We finally turned off onto a dirt track for a few kilometers before arriving at the eco-lodge Trilha dos Tucanos where we were to spend much of the day. This is a family run establishment with one of the busiest bird feeder activities I have ever experienced and an extensive network of trails that we simply could not work in the short time at our disposal . We therefore split our time enjoying the immediate surroundings of the main lodge buildings, close by forest and small lake.





From the moment we walked onto the property, we were surrounded by a throng of iridescent Green-headed Tanagers. They were accompanied by smaller number of both Azure-shouldered and Olive-green Tanagers; Plain and Maroon-breasted Parakeets together with several Red-rumped and the smaller Golden-winged Caciques all lured in by a constant supply of fruit provided by the lodge staff. The large Brazilian Ruby, the dazzling Violet-crowned Woodnymph and the elongated tailed Scale-throated Hermit hummingbirds took their turns at various sugar water feeders. Within minutes, it started to rain – a good time to enjoy an excellent breakfast buffet, juice and coffee.



The numerous windows in the main building afforded the possibility of birding and staying dry whilst it proverbially poured down outside – but the birds couldn't care less. Several Yellow-fronted Woodpeckers clambered up and down the trunk of a tree right in front of us and we soon added both Black-goggled and Ruby-crowned Tanagers; both Rufous-bellied Thrush and Rufous-collared Sparrow and a smart Black-throated Grosbeak coming into feed.



Alongside the lake at the back of the property a pair of Green Ibis stood guard, nonchalantly watching a Slaty-breasted Wood-Rail feeding right out in the open.



It was then banana time. Whole bananas were put out onto a hollowed out log feeding table and within seconds we were treated to the sight of not only 6 Saffron Toucanets eyeing up their favorite delicacy but also a stunning Spot-billed Toucanet whilst an inquisitive Red-breasted

Toucan flew in to find out what all the fuss was about. All this was taking place less than 10ft in front of us. Indeed by the time we left, birds were so accustomed to our presence

that several tanager species and at least one Saffron Toucanet actually pecked at bananas from people's outstretched hands.



During a brief respite from the drizzle, we walked a short distance along a forest trail and into a photo blind at the edge of a small clearing. Grain was put out in front of us and over the course of 30 mins or so, we managed to lure in both Riverbank Warbler and the exquisite Half-collared Sparrow. Field guide illustrations do not do the warbler justice. Its head and upper-parts are reminiscent of a Red-eyed Vireo; its stout legs recall a Kentucky Warbler and its feeding habits mirror that of a Northern Waterthrush. And as for the sparrow... it was simply gorgeous.



With just a short while before lunch, we walked up a slope opposite the car park and watched the action in a pink-blossomed tree. Hummingbird activity was almost constant. First to show were a pair of tiny Festive Coquettes closely followed by several wet looking Versicolored Emeralds and a rather elusive Swallow-tailed Hummingbird which was almost ever present but kept very much to the back of the tree. Finally a trio of Blue Dacnis added a further splash of color to the proceedings. With the prospect of lunch imminent, Demis lured in a most confiding Gray-hooded Attila – an excellent end to the morning's birding.



Lunch was taken still with half an eye on the busy feeder activity outside the windows. Again buffet style, the centerpiece was a local specialty "Feijoada" which is a mixture of various stewed meats with black beans together with a wide choice of vegetables, rice and salads.

With just an hour or so before we had to leave, and with rain still falling steadily both Planalto and Scalloped Woodcreepers climbed trees close to the car park, Golden-



chevroned and Magpie Tanagers together with both Violaceous and Chestnut-bellied Euphonias were new visitors to the feeders and we were totally underwhelmed by a tatty, wet and bedraggled looking Cinnamon-vented Piha. As Barry reminded us, beautiful vocalizations and beautiful plumage rarely go hand in hand.

A little beyond our pink-blossomed tree, we came to another small lake and found several more Riverbank Warblers. Once again Demis' skills came to the fore managing to entice in a male White-shouldered Fire-eye but sadly a calling Robust Woodpecker remained out of sight.

With the clock ticking away and a long return drive ahead of us, Demis tried with limited success to get us all back onto our bus. The toucanets were just so tame and confiding, it was difficult to tear ourselves away. Then Bob found a Black-fronted Piping-Guan silently feeding on a bunch of fruit hanging from a nearby palm tree. It and then its mate, posed statuesquely for the photographers. Time to get on the bus, at least one more try.

We had just closed the doors when a shout came out from some local birders close by – a stunning (and unusually confiding) male Red-ruffed Fruitcrow was perched in another nearby tree.

Five minutes later we managed to leave the property, only to stop several hundred yards along the track where we were able to lure in not only a pair of the extremely scarce Buff-throated Purpletuft but also a brightly colored pair of Gray-headed (or more aptly called Yellow-lored) Tody-Flycatchers and finally a diminutive Eared Pygmy-Tyrant.



We finally left, just as it stopped raining! It remained overcast for the remainder of our drive back to Sao Paulo, in time to meet up with the additional members of our tour group who had flown in this morning. A magnificent and unexpected start to birding southern Brazil for the early arrivals.

During the evening, the whole group got together, introductions were made over a welcome round of caipirinhas and dinner, and the tour officially began.



What a difference a day makes. Sao Paolo woke up to clear skies and sunshine. Our principal objective this morning was to fly to Cuiabá, the capital of Matto Grosso state to begin the Pantanal portion of our tour. Our two hour flight with Azul Airlines was both smooth and punctual; our bags came through quickly; we were met by Helen and Jose who are Xavier's local team based in Cuiabá and we set off south.



By late morning, it had warmed up to perhaps the early 70's F with not a cloud in the sky – ideal conditions for birding.



Being a Sunday, traffic was extremely light. Having left town, we initially passed through flat, dry scrubland which gradually gave way to more open grassland with scattered trees. Our first short birding stop was to check a couple of roadside lakes on the outskirts of Livramento village. The highlight were a pair of Bare-faced Ibis on one side of the road, our first Peach-fronted Parakeets on the other and a hunting female Amazon Kingfisher commuting between the two.



Some 60km from Cuiabá, we reached Poconé, the gateway town to the Pantanal where we took a Churrascaria lunch. This is a buffet style BBQ where the waiters constantly offered slices of chicken, beef and sausage, all to be eaten with a variety of salads. The local delicacies however were fried pineapple, dusted in cinnamon and baked wedges of cheese – and they were a simply mouth-watering.

We left the restaurant around 2:30pm with just three hours daylight left. From here there is a 12km rough road to the entrance gate at the start of the Transpantaneira. Many of the fields now held surface water and the roadside ditches were a hive of activity. By



making frequent stops and walking the road, in the final three hours of daylight we amassed a phenomenal 87 species.

Highlights were many: our first party of Greater Rheas, an iconic image of the region; two pairs of Bare-faced Curassows feeding along the muddy edge of a wide roadside ditch oblivious to their admiring audience and in fact paying more attention to the close proximity of a

number of Gray-necked Wood- Rails running to and fro but blatantly ignoring the Sunbittern feeding along the water's edge.



The wetlands of Brazil are synonymous with large wading birds. We enjoyed both Jabiru and Rufescent Tiger-Heron; Plumbeous, Green and Bare-faced Ibis and both Cocoi and exquisite Whistling Herons. With an abundance of food, the road is a great place to see perched birds of prey. We found a Black-collared Hawk on its nest; a perched adult Great Black Hawk; a number of Snail Kites together with a distant flying Aplomado Falcon.



However the region is not just about wetland birds. A pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars perched obligingly for the photographers amongst us. We enjoyed excellent views of Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, perhaps the most aesthetic of its family. A bright, almost garishly colored Campo Flicker sat atop a termites mound. Small parties of Peach-fronted Parakeets and a single Yellow-chevroned Parakeet were especially noisy and approachable.



Perhaps the award for "bird of the day" needs to be shared by two species. Firstly an intricately plumaged Rusty-collared Seedeater played hide and seek with us for a while and we have Helen to thank for finding a glorious Scarlet-headed

Blackbird – a photographers treat.



Obviously when a group is stretched out along the road, not everyone sees everything. Today Bob was in the right place at the right time. His perseverance paid off with brief views of both Blackish Rail and Laughing Falcon. And all this was in just three sunny afternoon hours.

All that remained was a short drive back towards Poconé before turning off onto the private driveway of the charming Pousada Puival, a 7,000 hectare cattle ranch and our base for the night. Shortly before we reached the lodge, our headlights caught a couple of Crab-eating Foxes trotting along the meadow, close to the road.

Day (3) Monday 18th July



Dawn in the Pantanal is definitely “fleece and gloves” wearing weather – that is for those who brought them! There is not a cloud in the sky and when the sun rises it becomes beautiful wildlife watching weather with temperatures probably in the late 70’s F.





We did not travel far today – all morning was spent scouring the vast grazing and flooded fields of Pousada Pluvial.

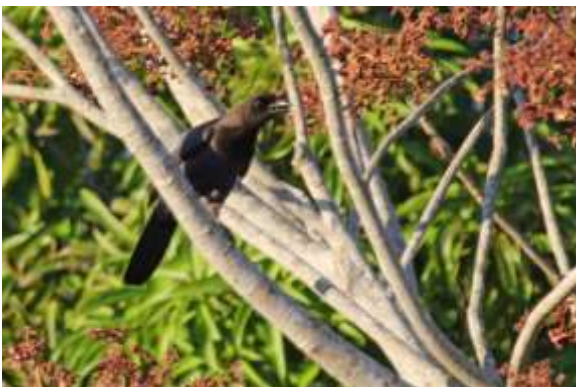
The sheer abundance of water birds and associated birds of prey is just breath-taking. Limpkins were feeding on apple snails in every patch of wetland – we saw at least 350. Enjoying the same diet were at least 100 Snail Kites.

Ibis were everywhere. We found over 80 Plumbeous, 45 Buff-necked and 20 Bare-faced.



Hérons and egrets abounded. Our tally included at least 100 Great Egret and 50 Cocoi Heron. There were always Wood Storks in the air. Our estimate of 100 was almost certainly conservative. Additionally we found around 20 majestic Jabiru and a colony of 50 Roseate Spoonbills.

Where there is water, inevitably there are ducks. Most numerous were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks; we totaled at least 280 with 33 of their White-faced cousins and 15 Muscovy Ducks thrown in for good measure. Kingfishers were prominent, feeding from roadside utility wires. We were to find at least 15 Ringed and 6 Amazon.





Our day began with a pre-dawn slow drive with spotlights searching for mammals. We found a couple of Crab-eating Foxes but little else. However as daylight grew, we were able to walk out into the pastures. We enjoyed displaying, almost pre-historic looking Red-legged Seriemas strutting around like a bustard. A close and confiding Turquoise-fronted Parrot took in the early morning rays atop a bare tree. A Toco

Toucan flew across in front of us. We found our first Purplish Jays and Crested Oropendolas, and several delicately plumaged Whistling Herons.

Xavier managed to spot the face and ears of a young Pampas Deer, alert and ever watchful crouched down in the grass and then, as we were returning to the bus – the absolute star bird of the region. A pair of Hyacinth Macaw were watched at length mutually preening beside the track. This species has been brought back almost from the edge of extinction and thanks to communities like Pousada Piuval, there are now an estimated population of some 2,000 birds and increasing.



Following a hearty breakfast we were to spend the next few hours on board an open sided, multi seater trailer, driven by towing tractor, slowly crossing the pastures, with our first groups of Capybaras totally ignoring us. Nacunda Nighthawks took flight from their daytime roosts.

We found our first and distant huge Southern Screamer, fortunately a group of three were subsequently seen flying much closer. Campo Flickers and the bizarre Guira Cuckoo added a splash of color beside termite mounds and Peg managed to locate several calling Yellowish Pipits creeping through the grasses. Birds of prey were prominent. Perched Savannah and Black-collared hawks posed for the cameras and we found our only Crane Hawk of the tour.

Eventually we reached the Corixo Verde – a tree-fringed wide water channel – which was alive with Yacare Caiman, we must have seen close to 100 individuals. Again it was surprising just how nonchalant they were to human presence. We walked to within just a few feet of them. The whole area was alive with nesting herons and storks. Our first

Black-crowned Night-Herons grunted their disapproval at being disturbed; Neotropic Cormorants panted in the sun; Large-billed Terns patrolled the water whilst a group of 18 Black Skimmers rested on the mud.



Back at the ranch, some of the group took up the offer of horse riding and came across a large, brownish-black snake which sadly remained unidentified. Others relaxed before lunch.



By 2:00pm, it was time to leave, join the Transpantaneira proper and drive some 35km before branching off through scrub forest, eventually reaching Pouso Alegre, another large cattle ranch and our base for the next two nights. We made just a couple of stops overlooking wetlands adding both Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Green Ibis and Yellow-chinned Spinetail to the proceedings.



As we got to the ranch, the sun was at a lovely angle, and Peg spied a group of Toco Toucans in a bare fruiting tree. She called to all in hearing range, but after the long day most were scattered.

Bob started off on a walk and Peg and Belinda joined in, most notable was finding a very tame pair of Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, and catching a glimpse of our first Chestnut-bellied Guans, and a shy Undulated Tinamou.



We then enjoyed dinner and tackled our growing bird list.



Day (4) Tuesday 19th July



Pouso Alegre is ornithologically critically important as it holds 5% of the world population of Hyacinth Macaws. Currently 100 birds can be found here and the number is increasing. However there is no room for complacency as each bird has a price on its head of between US\$ 8-10,000 and so the employees remain vigilant. This morning we probably saw 12 different individuals.



As we left for a pre-breakfast walk through the grounds, Thrush-like Wrens were particularly vocal but as with all members of this family, patience is required to get a good view as they clamber about inside the vegetation. These birds are of the sub-species *unicolor* where the “thrush-like” markings are restricted to the vent and under-tail coverts.

Several Toco Toucans were enjoying the early morning sun illustrating just why they are locally called “pumpkin beak” in Guyana. Chestnut-collared Aracari hung around the feeders when bananas were served.



A tree laden with pink blossom attracted two Piping Guans and amazingly separate species. Feeding side by side were both Blue-throated and Red-throated Piping-Guan.



Monk Parakeets were ever present – we must have found 40 and Guira Cuckoos were huddled together to keep warm and mutually preening. We found both Rufous Cachalote, a Cerrado endemic and then, without doubt the most attractive spinetail I have ever seen, Chotoy Spinetail.



As we neared a boardwalk over a small lily-strewn pond, a Marsh Deer slowly walked away from us, clearly aware of our presence but not over concerned. A group of Yellow-billed Cardinals included one handsome Red-crested Cardinal. An Epaulet Oriole sub-species *valenciobuensi* with cinnamon colored wing coverts patch was a surprise. However we have Helen to thank for the “bird of the morning” when she picked out three large macaws flying towards us – Blue-and-yellow Macaw and the only ones we were to see on the tour.



After breakfast we spent the morning birding the entrance track which wound its way through grazing pasture, a series of ponds and dry

scrub forest. We found our first South American Coatis, replete with bushy tails, happily trotting along the track. Both Wood Storks and Jabirus attended their nests. Barry found an obliging Black-capped Donacobius and we managed to lure in males of both Great and Barred Antshrikes.



For scarcity value, perhaps the most important sightings were of Greater Thornbird and Rufous Casiornis. Yet when considering the popularity stakes, nothing could beat an amazingly obliging Capped Heron, usually so shy and secretive but right out in the open today. A close second would be a perched Bat Falcon found by Peg and Bob.



We took a break during the middle of the day before driving to a blind which overlooks a particularly lily-strewn pond. On occasions mammals come into to drink during the early evening. Sadly today, all we saw was an Azari Agouti. However both Sunbitterns and Gray-necked Wood-Rails patrolled the water's edge. We also enjoyed great views of six Chestnut-eared Aracaris.



After dinner, we loaded into the ranch's open air vehicle, and venture out in search of mammals. Crab-eating foxes were found crossing the road, and before long we have the first of three Brazilian Tapir – wow! We had dim views at a Collared Peccary in deep brush. Pauraques were common, but no owls tonight. A beautiful Pantanal evening, but we did not linger as we knew we'd want to be up early the following day.

Day (5) Wednesday 20th July

The whole focus of today was to drive to the very end of the Transpantaneira– a drive of some 120km but which would take up most of the day.

A pre-breakfast walk in the fields surrounding the lodge saw repeats of species seen earlier, although both Little and Green-barred Woodpeckers were new.



Whilst the macaws are obviously the headline bird of Pouso Alegre, there is a second star attraction to be found in the trees immediately surrounding the buildings – Great Rufous Woodcreeper. If ever there was a name that is understated, this is it. This is a brute of a bird – a woodcreeper on steroids often keeping close to the base of the trunks.



Elsewhere, behind the lodge, a pair of Bare-faced Curassows strutted around and Yellow-billed Cardinals were everywhere.

Following breakfast there was still time to enjoy what we expected to be a final look at Hyacinth Macaws – a pair engaged in affectionate mutual grooming.



And so we started the long drive south. Initially the landscape was predominantly dry scrub forest interspersed by occasional stretches of dank vegetated ponds. Wherever there was water, we found the now familiar storks, herons, kites and kingfishers. As we neared the Rio Pixium, grasslands became more widespread interspersed with blossoming Piuva, or Purple Trumpet Trees.



We stopped at a picturesque ranch house, and walked up to a bridge where many species were active, including Epaulet Oriole and Boat-billed Heron. Kelly spotted a mother Capybara swimming with three young.



We took lunch at a beautifully located restaurant, beside the river where odd feeding companions were sat on the roof of a fishing hut. A Southern Caracara and an Anhinga sat almost side by side waiting for fishermen to throw scraps of fish up onto the roof.



With 70km still to drive, we continued on. A Marsh Deer crossed the road in front of us. Single Scarlet-headed Blackbird and Black-capped Donacobius sat atop bushes and, at one point a flock of 15 Nacunda Nighthawks took to the air. The further south we drove, the more dominant grassland became.



About 20km short of Porto Jofre, we stopped to explore a small “island” of trees in a sea of grass known locally and affectionately as “the Owl Spot” beside the road. Bob was the first to find an adult Great Horned Owl, sat in the treetops glaring own at us. Its demeanor came as no surprise as in the next tree sat a ball of fuzzy fluff that is a Great Horned Owlet, with its other parent in close attendance. On the other side of the road, both Green and American Pygmy Kingfishers sat quietly whilst out in the grasslands, huge Southern Screamers perched atop isolated bushes.

Finally we reached the end of the road and the Cuiabá River at Porte Jofre. Basically the port is just that, a jetty for boarding small boats and a hotel. To our amazement, feeding on the fruit of the Babassu palms right beside the hotel entrance, were four more Hyacinth Macaws. They just sat around, intent on picking off the oval shaped fruit and delicately extracting the juicy innards with both beak and claw.

From here, we took a 30 minute ride in a speed boat to reach our luxurious houseboat, the Jaguar do Pantanal, moored against a forested bank and our base for the next two nights.

We were the sole guests on board. Our cabins were quickly allocated. Each was well appointed with a fully kitted out bathroom and piping-hot shower.

Meals aboard the boat we unanimously voted the best of the whole tour. Despite the cramped kitchen facilities, one member of staff who doubled up as cook, waiter and Maitre d was an absolute superstar.



Day (6) Thursday 21st July



The modus operandi is that the houseboat remains moored in the one spot and all excursions are by 12 seater speed boats powered by a 150hp outboard motor. As we had come to expect, first thing in the morning is pretty cold and so we waited for the sun to come up before departing off around 6.45am on what was to be one of THE most memorable mornings of my life.



Our quest this morning was to see Jaguar, the third largest wild cat in the world. So wrapped up in scarves and blankets, we made our way speedily down a tributary before coming to a halt to enjoy a family group of Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys sunning themselves in the tops of trees; the male fat and black, the five youngsters almost lemon-blond colored. A little further down river, several Blue-throated Piping-Guans fed out on open branches.



A Neotropical River Otter briefly poked its head out of the water to check us out and the big rectangular head of a male Capybara peered at us through the rushes. Then our driver opened the throttle wide and we hurtled onwards with news of a female Jaguar sighted a mile or so ahead.



Jaguars on the Cuiabá River are acclimatized to human presence. Provided the boats remain a safe distance away, we are not even seen as a nuisance. We watched her off and on for about 45 minutes. Most of the time she was sat down staring at us, and then bored with that she would slowly walk through the tall grass. Often we could only keep track of her by watching for movement in the vegetation....and then she simply slinked away and out of sight. This was impressive enough but nothing could prepare us for our second view later in the morning.



So we ambled further down river, watching a couple of Brown Capuchin Monkeys in fruiting trees, Pied Lapwings, Black Skimmers, Yellow-billed and Large-billed Terns on the sand banks and Jabirus soaring low over the water.



Then news came through of other cat sighting – full speed ahead ! After 2-3 minutes, we sighted a small clan of Giant River Otters close to the far bank. Upon seeing us, they barked and squawked to each other and headed straight towards our boat. These are remarkably large, at least 6ft in length and full of curiosity. We watched them for perhaps five minutes, but there was a jaguar to see up ahead!





Our second cat, an adult female, was much more confiding. We remained about 20 meters off of the shore and watched her slowly walk along the top of the bank, obviously seeking out somewhere to relax. Eventually she came upon an open area of dried mud and so she just sat there and preened and washed herself, occasionally treating us to an eyeful of complete disdain. We stayed with her for about 30 minutes until she tired of being the center of attention and slowly walked back into the dense undergrowth and away.

We returned to the houseboat for lunch and a brief siesta before setting off up river once more at 2.30pm. By 3.00pm, we were moored up watching a male Capybara hunkered down on the mud. All of a sudden, sat up fully alert with ears twitching, gave an alarm call and threw itself into the water. Maybe as long as a minute later, an enormous, adult male Jaguar slowly prowled along the bank – all 600 lbs of him panting in the hot sun. Males are taller, with a wider head (and huge cajones) than their mates. He was restless, never really settling and so we followed him for five minutes or so as he walked through the tall grasses. He had



it

obviously had an altercation with something recently as he seemed to have a cut on his nose.



Three Jaguar in one day seems a bit of an extravagance and so we slowly drifted further downstream watching Large-billed Terns and Pied Lapwings, presumably at their nests, sat in shallow depressions in the mud. A couple more Giant Otters swam and chattered in the safety of the far bank protected by overhanging branches and then the word came over the radios that yet another Jaguar had been found.

This time we raced through the water for almost 30 minutes before coming to rest where a beautifully marked young female, replete with huge white whiskers sat right out in the open sunning herself. There she stayed for at least fifteen minutes. She was both relaxed and alert, in fact inquisitive at the attention she was getting. We decided to leave her in peace and just enjoy the last hour of daylight on the river before returning to base.

Several Blue-throated Piping-Guans flew across river, presumably to roost and a particularly photogenic Capped Heron perched low in a tree, just over the water's edge. We returned at dusk, just in time for the Band-tailed Nighthawk show. At least 15 were seen circling around us, chasing flying insects and some of the group even managed to see a beautiful large reddish-brown Fish-eating Bat. What a day!



Day (7) Friday 22nd July

Our young female Jaguar was once more sat out on top of her favored bank this morning, again taking a real interest in her admirers. The other real highlight of our final Cuiabá river trip was quality time, up close and personal with a clan of nine Giant River Otters.

When we first sighted them, they swam were alongside a fallen, partially sunken tree having their breakfast. At least four of them were crunching huge pieces of fish, whiskers gleaming in the sunlight. Now we could really separate adults from youngsters, the latter lacking the white throat and neck markings, so individual to their parents.



We probably stayed with them for 15 minutes or so. At one point, most got out of the water onto the muddy bank and scrambled through a tangle of roots before leaping back into the river again.



We next tried a different, much narrower and quieter channel. Three Southern Screamers were close by, we had great views of several Black-capped Donacobius, a lucky few glimpsed a Black-crowned Tityra and we all enjoyed the myriad of kingfishers, herons and hawks we had by now become so familiar with.



By mid-morning it was time to return to the houseboat, pack and retrace our steps northwards.

With Jose back behind the wheel of his coach, we covered the 30km or so to the “owl spot”. Once again, it was a magnet for birds. Additions to our bird list included Black-throated Mango and Glittering-bellied Emerald Hummingbirds, Large-billed Antwren, Ochre-cheeked Spinetail, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Short-crested Flycatcher and Ashy-headed Greenlet.



With many birds flicking around in the canopy, not everyone saw every new species. However there were still plenty of others found, both lower and out in the open. A female American Pygmy Kingfisher eventually posed (definitely a Kenefick identification moment to forget !) out in the open, Fuscous Flycatcher, Orange-headed Warbler and

White-lored Spinetail were particularly confiding and Common Tody Flycatchers were seen in their numbers.



We then had perhaps another 50km to travel north, before turning off west and onto the 2,500 hectares of Fazenda Santa Tereza, also known as the Pantanal Wildlife Centre, our base for the next two nights. By now the mid afternoon heat was intense and for most, much of the journey passed with eyes shut.

Don and Belinda lost not time climbing up on the Tower for a bird's eye view of the ranch, and a nesting Jabiru. In the last light of day – stunning!



Day (8) Saturday 23rd July

As you look out over the wonderful grounds at Santa Tereza, one prominent landmark is an observation tower constructed no more than 20 meters away from an active Jabiru nest. This huge mound of twigs and branches, perched

precariously atop a bare tree was the current home to three young chicks, the eldest just thirteen days old. It is absolutely breath-taking to see just how delicately the parent bird



uses its huge bill to gently feed her tiny chicks and how attentive she was in standing on duty for hours on end, shading her family with slightly arched wings.

Right outside the main building, the staff put out grain on the lawns attracting many tens of Picazuro Pigeons, Eared Doves and Saffron Finches. Orange-backed Troupials, Red-crested and Yellow-billed Cardinals find food in nearby trees whilst Yellow-chevroned Parakeets and Turquoise - fronted Parrots screech across the sky.



Immediately after breakfast, we set off for another boat ride. This time on the Pixaim river, much narrower, shallower and more heavily vegetated than the Cuiabá and filled with “wall to wall birds”. We were to spend around three hours quietly gliding down the waterway, thanks to our skilled boatmen. Obviously large wading birds were on prominent display. Most we had become very familiar with. We found at least 40 Rufescent Tiger-Herons – a density I have never experienced before. Upwards of a dozen quarrelsome Boat-billed Herons grunted and chuntered away at each other. Single Roseate Spoonbill and Capped Herons enriched the mix but it was an elusive, secretive Agami Heron, always keeping way back in the darkest edge of the canopy that was the star bird of the morning.



We found our only Matto Grosso and Band-tailed Antbirds of the tour, the former a pair dueting each other; the latter creeping amongst the muddy tree roots. A pair of Blue-crowned Trogons crossed the river over our heads before perching out in the open for a short while.



As we reached our “turning around point”, we were briefly joined by a hungry clan of four Giant River Otters. They were much more wary than their cousins of previous days but fun to watch nevertheless.



By now the sun was pretty fierce so it was time to retrace our step back to the Ranch and take on some fluids before a few of us took a late morning walk in some riverside dry scrub forest, where very special attractions lurked. Here, Helen’s local knowledge came to the fore.



We had only walked a few minutes when she alerted us to movement to our left. There, hiding low under a couple of bushes, its orange, black and white spotted face, and huge brown eyes, peering out at us was an Ocelot. We were aware that the Ranch guides had been putting food out for this creature and that it could often be found late evening in the area – but a truly wonderful sight nevertheless.



On we walked along a flat winding trail before we were treated to one of nature’s marvels of camouflage. A Great Potoo is 50 cm long. The tree it was roosting in had no leaves but its silvery gray plumage blended in wonderfully. Ever alert and totally aware of our presence, but with its eyes only slightly open, it was so confident in its disguise that it allowed us to remain in its company for several minutes.



We then backtracked a ways, and took a narrow path into denser more vegetated forest in search of one special bird – Helmeted Manakin. Bob’s keen eyesight found a male briefly which I alone was in the right place to see. So much bigger and longer tailed than most manakins, black with a bright crimson cap, spiking up at the front. We all saw its mate, drab olive-green by comparison but



with similar forehead knob...a few seconds view and then they were gone.

We all returned to the area for an extended walk once the heat of the day had subsided. Again the Potoo showed to all. Again, the Manakins took a lot of finding but eventually a male came into perch in branches right above us. We then played a game of cat and mouse with a young female Cream-colored Woodpecker. It would fly in circles in a wide arc around us, just being glimpsed through the canopy vegetation. But eventually flew into a viewable small tree where it stayed for its admiring audience of photographers.

Then the finale - back to the Ocelot. We quietly assembled in a tower hide overlooking a small clearing and waited patiently. After perhaps 10 minutes it nonchalantly came trotting towards us; crouched down staring but not seeing directly at us before slowly making its way out in full view across the clearing and away – without doubt one of the most magical sights I have ever witnessed.



Day (9) Sunday 24th July

One of our group departed today, as we finished up the main tour and moved into our extension. Delsie was already on her way back to Chicago, via Cuiabá and Sao Paulo by the time we enjoyed our final breakfast and morning in the Pantanal – time for just one final boat trip - this time up river.

Some of the resident birds recognize individual boatmen, knowing that there may be a scrap or two of fish being thrown out in their direction ...and so they follow the boats from tree to tree.



At one point we had both Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers together with both Great Black and Black-collared Hawks all taking it turns to fly straight at us and grab morsels thrown by our boatman off of the surface.



Eventually we reached an observation tower standing just inside the forest, probably 30 meters tall. Invariably when you watch from the tops of these towers you do not find an abundance of birds. However what you do find tends to be exciting. And that is exactly what was in store this morning. One species that always favors the canopy is Large-billed Antwren and we managed to entice a pair quite close into us. In nearby blossoming tree tops a pair of Orange-backed Troupials added a splash of color and a Scaly-headed Parrot perched out taking in the early morning sun.. Perhaps the most unexpected yet welcomed find was a fly past by three Golden-collared Macaws quickly followed by a White Woodpecker.



By mid-morning, with temperatures soaring, it was time to return and pack our bags and begin the weary journey north and then east.



Immediately after lunch, we bade farewell to Facenda Santa Teresa A pair of Marsh Deer gazed rather disinterestedly as we made our way along the entrance track but once we reached the main Transpantaneira it was a non-stop drive back to



Cuiabá, with a stop to take our picture under the iconic entry sign. We checked into an airport hotel late afternoon for a brief rest before a long day of travel.



Day (10) Monday 25th July

Our day began shortly after midnight, with a two hour flight to Campinas, quickly followed by another to Belo Horizonte, the state capital of Marais Gerais province. Both Azul flights were smooth and the staff both courteous and friendly. In the Arrivals area we met Favio, who was to be our driver during our stay. "Belo" as it is sometimes affectionately called is yet another huge Brazilian city and the whole region has grown up with the mining industry. Huge deposits of precious metals have been found here We then hit the road, initially a good set of highways out of the city followed by several hours of tedious winding roads in heavy traffic. This is the main road to Vitoria on the coast with its attendant large commercial vehicles.



However by 11.00am we were in the forested rolling hills arriving at the entrance to Santuario do Caraca, a huge, private, protected area covering nearly 10,200 hectares. The focal point is the monastery and surrounding buildings which was to be our base for the next two nights.

A brief stop, really just at a viewing point showed just how different this area is ornithologically. Right beside the road, we came across a pair of Rufous-headed Tanagers, one of several Brazil Atlantic Forest endemics we were to find today quickly followed by a tiny, inquisitive Hangnest Tody-Tyrant.



The plan was to drive straight up to the Admin building, but as is so often the case, birds got in the way. The last 200 meters of road held a number of species new for us including an outrageous male Pin-tailed Manakin, black and white with a crimson back and rump. By comparison the new for the tour Planalto Tyrannulet, Pallid Spinetail and Velvety-Black Tyrant were less exciting.



As we entered the open gardens, we hit a motherlode of color. A feeding flock of some 18 Gilt-edged Tanagers made their way across the trees in front of us – a mass of blue, green and yellow; amongst them several even brighter Brassy-breasted Tanagers. They stayed with us for several minutes before flitting off as a group, calling continuously.



We checked into our large but spartan rooms, had lunch and just enjoyed the tranquility. Ludicrously tame Dusky-legged Guans walked around on front of you, Blue and White Swallows hawked insects overhead whilst Masked Water-Tyrants, Cliff Flycatchers and Crested Black Tyrants sallied out from perches on the roof tops.. Here at some 1500 meters as, the air is fresh and we knew the temperature would drop dramatically once the sun went behind the hills.



Late afternoon in the woods here is no different to woods anywhere in the world – birdlife is quiet. We did find a male White-vented Violetear hummingbird guarding its favored crop of bright



red flowers together with a Sepia-capped Flycatcher and the bizarre white-capped Long-tailed Tyrant before retiring to add several layers of clothing

Many of us were at a pretty low ebb today – a combination of very little sleep, long distance travel and the cold temperatures of Caraca at night was taking its toll. Some of us planned hikes for the next day, while others went straight to bed after dinner.



However for those made of sterner stuff, there was the cabaret act that was the Maned Wolf show to enjoy. Over a period of years, several generations of this rare canine (designated as “near threatened” by IUCN) have acclimatized in

the knowledge that the Santuario is a safe food source. They obviously recognize individual priests who put out plates of chicken in the courtyard and are confident enough to walk right up to feed after dark. The sound of the priest’s voice talking steadily as if a sermon, calmed the wary animal, long enough for all of us to view. The wolf was wild, but acclimated, constantly aware of but not overly concerned by the gathered audience.



Day (11) Tuesday 26th July

It’s amazing what a good night’s sleep will do for the soul. Despite the cold, the bed linen and copious blankets coupled with piping hot showers put smiles on our faces. Early morning cloud cover added a few degrees to the air temperature but when the sun came up, the cloud soon burned off to leave a bright and extremely pleasant day/



A few of us gathered before breakfast for a short walk down to the vegetated pond below the monastery. This is the home of Blackish Rail, secretive like all of its family but in the early mornings it is viable to see. We had great looks as it fed right out in the open for several minutes.

Breakfast at Caraca is rather unique. The tables are laid with various breads plus a plate of cheese and cold meat. There is also a basket of eggs beside a large flat griddle, heated by a roaring log fire. The rest is up to you and I can testify that a fried egg sandwich with cheese and ham is a great way to start the day (in fact it was my favorite meal over the next two days!)



We were to spend much of the morning on a trail walking through the Cerrado for a couple of kilometers up to a very picturesque waterfall. This is fairly open country, reminiscent of Chaparral in California. It would be fair to say the birding was “quality at the expense of quantity”.



First to show were two new hummingbirds for the tour. An adult male Amethyst Woodstar posed wonderfully in the sunlight with its long forked tail and iridescent violet colored gorget. A little further out, a White-throated Hummingbird perched atop a bush, not close but easily identified. Further on we eventually enticed in an extremely localized Pale-throated Pampas-Finch another endemic to the Cerrado forest of south-eastern Brazil.



The trail entered a rather small patch of gallery forest, home to a much studied endemic mammal – the Black-faced Titi Monkey. We were able to watch a troop of perhaps half a dozen animals feeding in the canopy with their tiny black faces and long rufous colored bushy tails.

At the waterfall, a Red-ruffed Fruitcrow flew low over our heads. Little else was calling and nothing flying however it was peaceful and relaxing.



On the return journey, we deviated to watch from a wooden bridge over a slowly flowing stream. Here we had a series of tantalizingly brief but excellent views of the elusive Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper, who's vocalization to my ears is extremely similar to a Silvered Antbird.



Back at the monastery complex, there was time to relax in the sunshine before lunch. A Burnished-buff Tanager fed in a close tree and a magnificent adult King Vulture lazily soared overhead – it was that kind of day.

Mid-afternoon saw us driving down into the lowlands and we spent the remainder of daylight birding farmland with grazing pastures, streams, hedgerows and scattered trees before climbing a hill to another of the Sanctuario accommodation buildings that was surrounded by flowering trees and shrubs ...and birds were everywhere.



Several families of Yellow-headed Caracaras raucously called from any perch available – including on several occasions from the backs of cattle. Slaty-breasted Wood-Rails scurried about the lawns and wetter areas. Pairs of both Blue-winged Parrotlets and Blue-winged Macaws flew over calling.

We had a renewed introduction to particularly photogenic Capped and Whistling Herons together with absurdly tame Red-legged Seriemas. We added yet another tanager to our ever growing “tanager-list” with a male Fawn-colored Tanager sadly only showing to a couple of the party. Swallow-tailed Hummingbirds fed on a

purple flowering tree. A male Variable Antshrike was particularly confiding, more so than the Black-capped Antwren that stayed in the mid canopy.

A Streaked Xenops, replete with up-turned bill, pretended to be a nuthatch, hanging onto the underside of a flimsy branch and, just as the light was beginning to fade, a Rufous-browed Peppershrike was picked out quietly feeding in a tree by the car park. Sunset came with Crested Oropendola's displaying.



With temperatures plummeting once more, some of us gathered post dinner in the back courtyard to await the arrival of the Maned Wolf. He arrived a little later than last night and crunched away at his pieces of chicken and appeared indifferent to its much larger audience.

Day (12) Wednesday 27th July



Our final morning at Caraca. Whilst cold first thing, once the sun hit the trees, the temperatures rose gradually and bird life became active. Once again, just below the buildings we found ourselves hitting a wave of tanagers. This morning we must have seen 50 Gilt-edged Tanagers with several Brassy-breasted and Burnished-buff admixed.

I'm not sure if it is possible for a bird to be more brightly colored than a Brassy-breasted



Tanager but the males of a small group of Blue-naped Chlorophonias tried their hardest. Not everything in a Brazilian bird flock is gaudy in color. We also found a couple of Rufous-fronted Thornbirds and a Pallid Spinetail quietly feeding in the same trees.

This morning we tried a different strategy for breakfast. Let the crowds die down, arrive late and have the time and space to make your fried egg sandwiches in relative comfort. By now we had mastered cooking our eggs and toast on the ancient setup!



Belinda and Kelly decided hiking one of the quiet Cerrado trails was the order of the morning. For the rest of us, with just a couple of hours birding time left, there was a return to the farm visited yesterday afternoon. To be fair, with the morning getting hotter, birdlife was quieter than previous. A quick scenic roadside stop for the photographers, allowed us time to find a pair of Cinnamon Tanagers perched up in the Cerrado.



Down at the farm, Swallow-tailed Hummingbirds still put on quite a show, a dazzling crimson red adult male Brazilian Tanager carved its way inside an over-ripe papaya; Blue-winged Macaws circled us squawking noisily and several new

flycatchers were found including the confusingly similar Greenish and Plain-crested Elaenias.

By 10.30am, everything had quietened down and it was time to return to pack our bags and room check-out. One last trail to hike – down to a very picturesque river bed – no birds seen but on the way back, Bob and I noticed movement down a side trail. There in full view, for several minutes, a magnificent adult male Pin-tailed Manakin.

A final lunch and then we were on our way, with one more irresistible stop for our photographers to capture this landscape.

Another short hike above an abandoned outdoor swimming pool was little more than a leg stretch and then it was back to the rolling hills and ever winding roads en route to our base for the night, the World Heritage town of Ouro Preto.



Even the most tedious hot afternoon drives can turn up surprises. Admittedly, a short walk beside a lake only produced a Sooty Tyrannulet, hardly something to get the pulses racing. However shortly after, we were skirting an uninspiring small town and passing equally uninspiring sloping meadows when Xavier shouted for the bus to stop. En mass we crossed the busy road, climbed up a small bank and spent the next 10

minutes in the company not only of a pair of Yellow-rumped Marshbirds, themselves a totally unexpected find but even more bizarrely, two pairs of Streamer-tailed Tyrants perched on overhead wires. The males were actively displaying to each other, raising their short wings and splaying their extraordinary long tail feathers, calling all the time. Yet another truly magical moment

From there, it was a further hours' drive to the Grand Hotel, our base for the penultimate night of the tour. Colors of this historic city were as brilliant as the birds!

Day (13) Thursday 28th July

The group put birding behind them today in order to explore this culturally iconic city, though Barry would pull out a sighting of King Vulture at the lunch stop to keep us on our toes.

Ouro Preto is a World Heritage Site and fascinating to explore. Before our eyes, though architecture, we learned of the days of colonial powers, their wealth, the slave trade (much larger than that of the US, to Brazil's core mining areas such as this).





We saw elaborate churches, and learned of the social hierarchy and how the city was laid out. It was a constant light show on the tile roofs and buildings, really a stunning place.



Our local guide kept us moving, including a walk into a mine – a sobering reminder of the toll on human workers to reap the mineral wealth. We could have lingered and explored

much longer, and our questions flowed like a fast-moving stream as we learned first-hand, this history.

At 4.00pm, we loaded Favio's bus for the final time and initially made excellent progress on fast highways. Then we hit Belo Horizonte commuter traffic. This is the sixth largest city in Brazil, home to some three million people and it seemed every single one of them owned a vehicle of some kind. Nevertheless, we eventually arrived at the Comfort Hotel, a mere 2 kilometers from the airport.

Day (14) Friday 29th July



Just looking out of my hotel window, before breakfast, no less than three Toco Toucans lazily flapped past – yet another reminder that quality birds can be seen absolutely everywhere in Brazil. The tour was effectively over. We had one last Azul flight back to Sao Paulo where the group said their good-byes. Most had departures later that night to Dallas, Miami and, for Barry, Mexico City. Bob and Kelly were flying on to Uruguay for a few days and I had an overnight in Sao Paulo before the return journey to Trinidad.

A thoroughly enjoyable tour – many friendships made – many lasting memories.

Thanks Peg and Xavier, Helen and Jose, for the team work to create this grand adventure!





Photo Credits:

Pg. 1: Saffron Toucanet, Peg Abbott (PA); Xavier, Don Cooper (DC); Yacare Caiman, PA. Pg. 2: Plain Parakeets at Trilha, PA; Trail at Trilha, PA. Pg. 3: Feeder frenzy, PA; Magpie Tanager, PA; Spot-billed Toucanet, PA; Red-bellied Toucan; PA. Pg. 4: Riverbank Warbler; PA; Yellow-fronted Woodpecker, Barry Ulman (BU); Maroon-bellied Parakeet, PA; Blue Dacnis, PA. Pg. 5: Yellow-chevroned Tanager, BU; Ty at the bar, PA. Pg. 6: Helen and Jose, PA; Amazon Kingfisher, PA; Martyn with scope, PA; Greater Rhea, PA. Pg. 7: Group, PA; Jabiru in flight, PA; Rufescent Tiger-Heron, PA; Locals fishing, PA. Pg. 8: Scarlet-headed Blackbird, PA; Snail Kite, PA; Black-faced Currasow, PA; Kelly, PA; Plumbeous Ibis, DC. Pg. 9: Barry w Brazil T-shirt, PA; Dawn birding, PA; Purplish Jay, PA; Red-legged Seriemas, BU. Pg. 10: Hyacinth Macaws, PA; Southern Screammers, PA; Piuval Tractor, PA; Yellowish Pipit, PA. Pg. 11: Yacare Caiman, PA; Riders, DC; Breakfast, PA; Chestnut-bellied Guans, PA. Pg. 12: Termite Mound, PA; Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, PA; Hyacinth Macaws preening, PA; Toco Toucans, DC; Collared Aracari, BU. Pg 12: Piping-guans, PA; Chotoy Spinetail, PA; Gray-crowned (Rufous) Cachalote, PA; Blue-and-gold Macaws in flight, PA; Marsh Deer, PA. Pg. 13: Capped Heron, DC; Birders, PA; Crab-eating fox, DC. Pg. 14: Sunrise, PA; Belinda, DC; Green-barred Woodpecker, PA; Ranch scenic, PA; Capybaras, PA. Pg. 15: Birders at Owl Place, PA; Great Horned Owl, DC; Hyacinth Macaw, DC. Pg. 16: Kelly, Delsie, PA; Lindsey at breakfast, PA; Jaguar do Pantanal, PA; Black-and-gold Howler Monkey, DC. Pg. 17: Capybaras, PA; Jaguar boats lined up, PA; Jaguar resting, BU; Brown Capuchin, DC. Pg. 18: Jaguar (2), PA, Jaguar next 2: BU; Giant Otter (2) PA;. Pg. 19: Giant Otter (3) and Black Skimmer, PA; Male Jaguar, DC. Pg. 20: Large-billed Tern (2) BU; Piping-guan flying, PA. Pg. 21: Cocoi Heron, PA; Black-capped Donacobious, PA; Capybara, PA; Orange-headed Warbler, PA. Pg. 22: Pygmy Kingfisher, PA; South Wild Tower, PA; Jabiru brooding, DC.; Birders, PA; Jabiru nest, PA.



Pg. 23: South Wild Ranch, PA; Picazuro Pigeon, PA; Boat excursion, PA; Agami Heron, PA. Pg. 24: Roseate Spoonbill, BU; River Scenic, PA; Ocelot, DC; Birders, PA. Pg. 25: Great Potoo, DC; Cream-

colored Woodpecker, PA; Breakfast, PA. Pg. 26: Ringed Kingfisher, DC; Black-collared Hawk flying, BU; Black-collared Hawk landing, PA; Breakfast Kelly Bob, PA; Transpantianera, PA.



EXTENSION: Pg. 27: Caraca landscape, DC; Hangnest Tody Tyrant, PA; Rufous-headed Tanager, PA. Pg. 28: Pin-tailed Manakin, BU; Velvety-black Tyrant, BU; Brassy-breasted Tanager, BU; Gilt-edged Tanager, BU. Pg. 29: Kelly and Belinda, PA; Maned Wolf, PA; Steeple, DC. Pg. 30: Caraca Birders, PA; Pale-throated Pampas Finch, PA; Black-faced Dusky Titi, PA; King Vulture, PA. Pg. 31: Burnished-buff Tanager, PA; Slaty-breasted Woodrail, PA; Caraca cross, DC. Pg. 32: Crested Oropendola display, PA; Cliff flycatcher landing, PA; Caraca hiking, PA; Caraca breakfast (2), PA. Pg. 34: Streamer-tailed Tyrants, DC; Ouro Preto town, DC. Pg. 35: Church, PA; Poor Man's Church, PA; Cherub, PA; Steeple, PA; Guide, PA; Group in church, PA. Pg 36: Jose, PA; Helen, DC, Peg, DC. Pg. 37: Cattle drive on Transpantianera, PA; Birders and Jabiru, PA; Boardwalk, PA; Birding, PA. Pg. 38: Yellow-rumped Cacique, PA; Yellow-billed Cardinal, PA; Woodstork, BU; Whistling Heron, PA; Lindsey in Hammock. Xavier and Don, PA.

