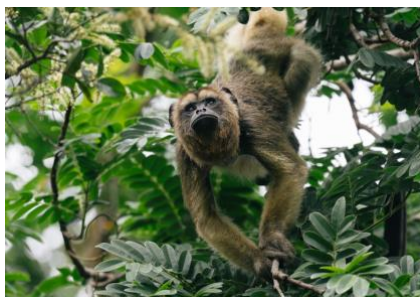


# Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars and more! | Trip Report | Oct. 11 – 21, 2022 | by Wes Larson



With guide, Wes Larson, and participants: David, Eric, Emily, Jeanette, Jessie, John, Laura, Nate, and Steven



**Tues., Oct. 11**

## **Arrivals | Our First Dinner Together**

Everyone arrived from either the Atlantic Forest extension or from their flights to Brazil! Some spent the afternoon resting in the hotel while a few of us did some birding in the pool area, and then we met in the evening for a quick caipirinha (a Brazilian cocktail made from lime, sugar and cachaca that would be enjoyed throughout our trip). We took a few minutes for introductions and to discuss the trip and review the species list. We had a big and delicious dinner at the hotel with some Brazilian favorites, and Wes encouraged everyone to try their first pão de queijo, his favorite Brazilian food.



**Wed., Oct. 12**

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

We had an early start to get to the GRU airport and then a flight to Campo Grande where we met our driver, Alberto, who whisked us down the highway to our first location at the Aguapé Lodge and Ranch. On the way we stopped at a small café to get some Brazilian snacks including pastel and pão de queijo, and we did some birding in the parking lot where we saw Fork-tailed Flycatchers and Nanday Parakeets. Continuing our drive, some from the group saw Blue-and-yellow Macaws along the highway, what a way to start off the tour! Once we reached the turnoff for Aguapé, the road turned to dirt road and the bird sightings became much more frequent. We saw our first of many Toco Toucans including one being chased by a Great Kiskadee! Other species sighted during the drive included Greater Rhea, Southern Screamer, Muscovy Duck, Picazuro Pigeon, Rufescent Tiger-Heron and many others. Shortly before arriving to the pousada, we also were lucky enough to see our first Giant Anteater, and to our surprise it was carrying a pup on its back! We had heard that anteater sightings were something to hope for in the area, and even though the first sighting was brief, it was a thrill to see this iconic mammal in its natural habitat.

Arriving at the lodge we soon realized why Aguapé is so popular among birders as both feeders and nesting boxes were surrounded with abundant bird life including Yellow-billed Cardinals, Nanday Parakeets, Monk Parakeets, Plush-crested Jays, Blue-and-yellow Macaws, and Saffron Finches. But one of the most common and charismatic birds around the lodge is the Hyacinth Macaw. Aguapé, like many lodges in the area, has worked closely with conservation groups to provide critical nesting and feeding habitat for Hyacinth Macaws. These absolutely stunning, huge blue macaws are commonly seen around the lodge and surrounding farmlands. After waiting out some afternoon rain, we took to the safari vehicle with our local guide, Rosalino, and set out to see some wildlife. As we drove down one of the many two-track roads of the farm, we saw many different birds, including our first Jabiru. The massive storks are considered the symbol of the Pantanal, and the first one we saw at Aguapé followed the vehicle for a bit, giving us a real show. Around the same time, we saw our first Yacare caiman up close, and our first group of capybara. Not long after we got a second look at another giant anteater with a pup on its back! This one was weaving through some distant cattle, and we were able to watch it through the scope and our binoculars for about 10 minutes before it disappeared from view. Back at Aguapé, we enjoyed



some delicious home-cooked Brazilian food made completely from scratch on the farm (they even make their own cheese and milk!) and then we settled in to review our first species list together as a complete group.

## **Thurs., Oct 13                      Full Day at Aguapé**

We were up at the crack of dawn to head out on a safari to hopefully find some new bird species that we didn't locate the day before. We decided to drive to a small camp near the Aquidauana River. Being near the water, this location held some new surprises for us that we hadn't yet seen around the farm, and we got a nice look at an Amazonian Motmot, as well as a Red-billed Scythebill. A Rufous Jacamar also made an appearance, landing on a nearby utility wire, and giving us a full view of its beautiful green and rufous feathers while it hunted insects. Other species seen in this location included Ringed Kingfisher, Amazon Kingfisher, Plumbeous Ibis, Anhinga, Neotropical Cormorant, Black-crowned Night-Heron and black capuchin monkey.

We returned to the lodge for breakfast and then headed back out for a short safari before lunch. Rosalino and Roberto were quick to spot and identify birds, and we saw many species including Southern Lapwing, Red-legged Seriema, Savanna Hawk, Snail Kite, Plush-crested Jay, Aplomado Falcon, Rufous-fronted Thornbird and Yellowish Pipit. At times it seemed like just stopping and waiting would lead to more and more species showing up, as almost every location in the farmlands and jungles surrounding Aguapé was teeming with life. Lunch featured feijoada, one of Wes's favorite Brazilian dishes, and we talked about the roots of the bean soup over rice while some of the resident mockingbirds tried to steal scraps from the table. Speaking of scraps, Aguapé is home to a robust population of six-banded armadillo, and some of them have become bold enough to look for scraps around the dining area. It's not uncommon to look down to see an armadillo go running by your feet, all part of the charm of the location! One armadillo, lovingly named *confusão* (confusion) by the staff, is practically a pet and was seen at almost every meal. Add to that, the numerous colorful birds on feeders just feet away, and Aguapé is a pretty magical place to eat!

After lunch many of our group attended a presentation hosted by giant anteater researchers based out of Aguapé. This group is working to rescue orphaned anteater babies and raise them in a way that they can be returned to the wild. It was great to see that there are groups fighting to preserve one of the most charismatic animals found in the Pantanal.



After dinner, Roberto, Wes and Rosalino led a night walk down to the river and those that decided to brave the bugs were treated to our first snake sighting of the trip, a false Fer-de-lance, as well as a Mato Grosso snouted frog, some *Nacunda* Nighthawks and several large tarantulas. We also saw some new mammals on the walk including a nine-banded armadillo and a crab-eating raccoon.

## **Fri., Oct. 14                      Full Day at Aguapé**

We left the pousada at 5:30 a.m. for a safari drive and both Roberto and Rosalino were especially successful in finding some new birds this morning. We had great looks at Peach-fronted Parakeets, Bare-faced Ibis, Black-collared Hawk, Campo Flicker, Turquoise-fronted Parrot and many others.

We returned for breakfast and talked to some of the group that had missed the trip to the riparian area the previous day, and we decided that we would return to the camp where we had spotted the scythebill. And we lucked out! Our return to the camp resulted in some amazing views of two scythebills as well as our first great view of a troupiar. Up until this point we had yet to get a good look at the beautifully colored giant ameiva lizards that are common in the underbrush of the Pantanal, but we found a vibrant individual sunning on a piece of roofing material while watching the scythebills. It was a gorgeous morning and a bit of cloud cover made for a pleasant ride and some great light for photos. On the way back to the pousada, we attempted to find an Undulated Tinamou, and although we could hear their calls in the distance, we had yet to get any glimpses of the elusive birds.

We had seen many beautiful Toco Toucans but had yet to have a really amazing photo opportunity of one, so the group was tickled when an especially gorgeous Toco Toucan spent much of lunch feeding on papaya right next to the eating area. It made for an unreal photo subject and a muse for one of Dave's incredible watercolor paintings.

After lunch we went for another drive and decided to re-visit one of the roads where we had seen the most abundant wildlife on the ranch. We saw some very interesting interactions between Southern Lapwings, Crested Caracaras and Aplomado Falcons, and we were joined for a bit by the resident Jabiru, which took off in flight at the perfect time to join a pair of Hyacinth Macaws for a flight through the sunset clouds. The drive also gave us



some great looks at wood-rails, Burrowing Owls, Whistling Herons and a Southern Lapwing guarding her nest. As we headed home in the dark, we also were thrilled to see our first tamandua, or lesser anteater. This amazing little mammal was approaching the two-track road but paused when it saw the safari vehicle and then slowly walked back into the protection of the bush. It was truly an exciting sighting and little did we know we would have a much longer look at this elusive mammal the next day. At dinner we saw a tiny pygmy-owl near the eating area as well as some Burrowing Owls and then a group of three or four crab-eating foxes appeared, scouring the grounds for any scraps that might have been dropped, before disappearing just as fast as they had shown up. We also found a large tarantula not far from the main office and made a point of showing the group just how docile and gentle these massive arachnids are.

## **Sat., Oct. 15                      Aguapé to Campo Grande**

We started the day with an early morning jeep safari to an area of the fazenda where Rosalino thought we would have our best chance to find the shy and elusive Undulated Tinamou. After attempting to call the birds for some time we drove on a bit further and were thrilled to find two tinamous close to some overhanging brush. The birds spent long enough in the open to give us some great looks and we were all excited to be able to add them to our list of sighted birds. We saw several other species on the drive including a good look at a Blue-crowned Trogon. Toward the end of the drive, Rosalino had parked near a clump of trees to look for birds and exited the jeep to investigate some noise he heard in the trees. To our surprise he had heard a tamandua and we all had the chance to see the little mammal search for ants and termites on the ground, and then climb one of the trees in the small grove as well. It was an incredible sighting as we were able to spend almost half an hour with the beautifully colored and gracefully arboreal tamandua. After breakfast the day continued with a boat ride on the Aquidauana River. The boats were small so we split into two groups that stayed near each other during the entire journey. One of the highlights was a quick stop to venture into the jungle where we saw beautiful male and female Band-tailed Manakins. The bright orange, red, yellow and black colored male was particularly visible, and the whole group had time to admire and photograph the tiny bird before it flittered off into denser jungle. For some of the group, manakins had been very high target birds, so it was an especially



welcome sighting and we got back into the boats in high spirits. Along the river we also saw our first large group of black and gold howler monkeys, and one of the golden female monkeys with a small baby carefully watched our boats as we passed, letting the rest of her troop know we were there by producing the deep grunting noise that earned them their names. We saw many birds on the river trip including Anhinga and Neotropic Cormorants, and we got some great looks at beautifully colored Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers.

After one last lunch in Aguapé, we loaded into the van, said our goodbyes to Rosalino and the rest of the staff, and headed off for the return trip to Campo Grande. A few people in our group had not gotten a great look at the giant anteaters, so we carefully scanned the termite-filled grasslands that lined the dirt road back to the main highway. Just as we were losing hope, Emily saw something. We turned the van around to investigate and sure enough it was another giant anteater, and once again with a pup on its back! This one was very visible in the field where it was digging for termites. As we watched, it got closer and closer to the group, allowing us to appreciate its beautiful markings, and of course the adorable pup on its back. What an incredible sighting -- about as good of a look at a giant anteater as you could ask for. The rest of the drive to Campo Grande was fairly uneventful. That night we checked into Hotel Mohave and because we knew we had very early flights the next day, we met up for an early dinner and species list before calling it a night.

## **Sun., Oct. 16                      Flights from Campo Grande to Cuiabá | Pousada Rio Claro in the Northern Pantanal**

A VERY early morning to catch the first flight to Brasília and then Cuiabá. The upside to such an early morning is that it got us to Cuiabá with plenty of time to meet our new driver, Magno, and to drive from the bustling city of Cuiabá to the small town of Poconé, where we got to have an authentic lunch in a churrascaria restaurant. With full stomachs, we left the restaurant and before long arrived at the famous sign that marks the start of the Transpantaneira highway, one of the best safari roads in the entire world, and the de facto edge of the greater northern Pantanal wetlands.

Our first lodge in the northern Pantanal was Pouso Alegre, and on our drive there we were treated to a number of new bird sightings including a fleeting glance of our first aracari of the trip. The narrow road to the lodge was teeming with life and we saw many Azara's agouti, Argentine Tegu, Bare-faced Curassows, and other wildlife on our approach to the lodge. At the lodge we saw several South American coati, a Sunbittern, a beautiful marsh deer and some very fresh tapir tracks. Unfortunately the pandemic seems to have been hard on Pouso Alegre,



and the rooms were in such a state of disrepair (some without working air conditioners in the stifling heat) that we decided to seek lodging elsewhere. We loaded the van and drove to Pousada Rio Claro about an hour away, arriving at the new lodge after dark. After checking into our rooms, we met up for a delicious home-cooked dinner, some caipirinhas, and our nightly species list report. Rio Claro was our first lodge where the chaco tree frogs were plentiful, and Wes showed us a particularly large specimen before we all crashed from the exhaustion of a long and eventful day.

## **Mon., Oct. 17                      Rio Claro Lodge | Houseboat Hotel on the Cuiabá River**

Some of the group woke up early to do a bit of birding around the lodge and the nearby river. We managed to see another Undulated Tinamou as well as a great look at a crab-eating fox and a variety of parakeets and other birds, plus a nice sighting of a Scaled Dove at the Pousada feeders.

After breakfast we loaded into the vans and headed to the end of the Transpantaneira highway and Porto Jofre. The road is quite the adventure. In addition to constant bird, mammal and reptile sightings (you'll see thousands of caiman just driving the road!), there are also some bridge crossings that add to the thrill of driving down a rural highway in the heart of the Pantanal. During the drive we saw one of our first hummingbirds in the Pantanal, a Glittering Emerald, and we stopped at the Mato Grosso Lodge where we saw Yellow-rumped Caciques, Ringed Kingfishers and nesting Narrow-billed Woodcreeper. With hundreds of picturesque locations full of native birds, it's almost impossible to keep on schedule on the Transpantaneira, but we were determined to make it to Porto Jofre in time to catch our water taxi to the Houseboat Hotel!

As soon as we arrived in Porto Jofre, we quickly transferred our luggage to the boats in preparation for the roughly 20-min. voyage to our iconic lodging in the middle of the Cuiabá River. Along the way we were lucky enough to see a group of five or six giant otters! These playful mustelids are commonly seen sticking their long necks above the surface of the water and vocalizing to each other while hunting and watching for potential threats. One of the otters had just caught a fish, and we were thrilled to watch them continue traveling along the bank of the river while sharing the catch.

WE arrived at the panoramic Boat Hotel and enjoyed a delicious, if slightly late lunch. All our lodges served authentic Brazilian cuisine for each meal, such an incredible highlight of the trip. After our meal, we boarded a large boat and set off to go look for jaguars on the Rio Cuiabá! The local motorboat captains share news of jaguar sightings on their radios, and then the boats speed off in hopes of "spotting" them. It's a very exhilarating part of the trip, and nothing quite beats the feeling of speeding along the river and scanning the banks for the apex predator of South and Central America! When we arrived at the first location where a jaguar had been seen, the cat had already disappeared into the forest. But to our surprise a call came over the radio that a tapir



was visible not far from where we were! Many of the group had listed tapir as one of their most-hoped-for mammals, so we were thrilled to see a large Brazilian tapir cooling off in the river in the late afternoon heat. Truly an unexpected treat and a great start to our first jaguar safari.

While watching the tapir, another jaguar sighting came over the radio, and once again we sped off only to suffer some mechanical issues near our houseboat. Fortunately we were able to make a quick switch into two new boats and we were once again racing toward the last seen location of the big cat! We followed a small tributary up to where it was almost no longer passable, and all of us were absolutely delighted to see that the jaguar was still there, crouched below a tree and actively hunting caiman. We arrived just as the other boats were leaving, allowing us to spend nearly an hour with just our group and the beautiful cat. This was a truly magical turn of events. We even got to see it pounce into the water twice, narrowly missing some fortunate caiman!

Everyone was ecstatic as we motored back to the houseboat, buzzing from our first jaguar sighting. During dinner we traded photos and videos of the beautiful female jaguar, and we also celebrated Roberto's birthday! What a way to spend a birthday, floating on a houseboat in the heart of one of the wildest most pristine jungles in the world, surrounded by a really great group of wildlife enthusiasts and all-around nice people! That night some of the guests tried their hand at piranha fishing from the side of the houseboat and quickly caught and released several of the carnivorous fish.

## **Tues., Oct. 18                      Full Day Looking for Jaguars on the Cuiabá River**

Today we planned to spend the full day on the river Cuiabá, and we awoke anticipating more amazing wildlife and possibly another jaguar sighting. We wouldn't be disappointed. Following breakfast, we boarded the boats early, with all eyes scanning the banks for any signs of movement. Both boats got a nice sighting of a Great Potoo in a tree near the riverbank and then we happened upon a particularly playful group of giant otters that were taking turns consuming a large eel. As we watched, they suddenly gave loud warning calls and scattered into the water. Then the radio crackled with the news of a jaguar sighting not far from where we were! We were fortunate to locate the beautiful cat swimming along the shoreline just before it disappeared into the jungle. A brief encounter, but our boat captains knew the river and we whooshed off around a bend to a spot where they hoped the jaguar would reappear. And it did! We were treated to an amazing scene as the jaguar hunted and



then rested on a large dead tree protruding over the water. What an amazing experience, watching South America's top predator in the wild! For some of our group it was an emotional moment. We returned to the houseboat for lunch and some rest and then headed back out in the boats to continue our adventures. As luck would have it, we found our third jaguar not long after, watching as it patrolled the riverbank, alternately swimming and walking as it searched for caiman, capybara or whatever else might appear. We felt incredibly fortunate to be in a place that provides such good jaguar sightings throughout the day, and the northern Pantanal is truly the only place on earth where the big cats can be seen with this kind of frequency.

It was a particularly beautiful day on the river that led to some great bird sightings as well. In addition to the Great Potoo, Band-tailed Nighthawks, Black-throated Mango, Black Skimmers, Capped Herons, Rufescent Tiger-Herons, Crane Hawk, many kingfishers, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Robust Woodpecker, Bat Falcon, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, White-headed Marsh-Tyrant and many others. We capped off the day with a delicious dinner just as the sun was setting and toasted Roberto's birthday.

### **Wed., Oct. 19                      Panoramic Houseboat Hotel to Southwild Pantanal**

Savoring our final breakfast aboard the beautiful houseboat hotel, we then prepared our luggage for the return trip to Porto Jofre. While packing, we heard a splash off the stern of the boat and went to investigate, arriving just in time to see a large animal enter the brush. Its long tail was just visible, protruding from the jungle undergrowth, and he quickly alerted Laura and Eric who were nearby. A jaguar, and one right next to the boat! They yelled to some of the other guests, and a lucky small group got to see the cat before it disappeared in a beautiful patch of jungle on the starboard side of the houseboat. But once again our boat captains knew exactly what to do. After loading our luggage into the smaller boats, we headed off and were thrilled when they relocated the jaguar just downriver. Such an amazing sendoff from one of the wildest places on earth and the true stronghold of the world's third largest cat. We had great looks at four different jaguars on the trip. Everyone was thrilled as these were memories that would last a lifetime.

Back in Porto Jofre, we loaded the van and began our return trip on the Transpantaneira Highway, making frequent stops for birds. We saw large groups of Maguari Storks, Wood Storks, Jabiru, Capped Herons, Cooi



Herons, Roseate Spoonbills and other birds feeding in the shallow marshes and ponds lining the roads. The bird life along the highway is almost overwhelming, and every stretch of the road seemed to hide new surprises. With the wonder of spending multiple days on a boat in the heart of the Pantanal still fresh in our minds, many of our guests chose to simply relax on the drive and get some much-appreciated rest.

That afternoon we arrived at our final lodge, Southwild Pantanal, a beautiful location where we were greeted with fresh tropical juice and a mouthwatering lunch. Next we embarked on a small safari around the Santa Tereza ranch where we had amazing views of Orange-backed Troupials. It was hot so we returned a bit early to cool down and prepare for one of the highlights at Southwild Pantanal, a resident ocelot that is often seen in the jungle not far from the lodge. At dusk we settled into the area and one of the local guides explained that it had been several days since the medium-sized, spotted cat was last seen. But after only 15 minutes of waiting in complete silence, listening to the sounds of the jungle, the ocelot appeared! We were able to view the absolutely gorgeous cat for about 10 minutes before it noiselessly disappeared back into the dark jungle once again. The evening's dinner tasted especially good after a day that included both an ocelot and a jaguar! Later we all enjoyed the abundance of tree frogs that could be found around the exterior of the lodge. Before heading to bed, Roberto spotted a Great Horned Owl perched nearby, the perfect bedtime treat!

## **Thurs., Oct. 20                      Southwild Pantanal on the Santa Tereza Ranch | Pixaim River**

This morning we visited an observation tower about a mile from the lodge. The walk took us through some dense underbrush, giving us an intimate look at the jungle. We marveled at the long lines of leafcutter ants crisscrossing the jungle floor, and stopped to watch an especially visible group of black-and-gold howler monkeys in a large tree. These wouldn't be the only primates we would see on the walk. We soon came upon a group of Azara's capuchins in the trees surrounding the observation tower. In a denser part of the jungle, we had a nice sighting of a Flavescent Warbler, the only warbler of the trip. Like all the lodges we visited, Southwild has amazing feeders around the property that attract parakeets, finches, jays, doves, pigeons and cardinals throughout the day. A pair of Green-backed Becards that lived close to the lodge were regularly seen as well.



It was another hot day and we opted to spend the time after lunch exploring the areas around the lodge, relaxing in our cool rooms and enjoying the refreshing plunge pool. In the late afternoon we boarded one of the boats provided by Southwild and set out to explore the Pixaim River. Our primary target was the brilliantly colored and notoriously shy Agami Herons that sometimes call that stretch of river home. While we didn't see any Agamis, we all enjoyed the relaxing and beautiful ride on the river and, of course we saw some new birds! We had excellent looks at Sungrebes, a Mato Grosso Antbird, and our first Green-and-rufous Kingfisher. On our return, we noticed some VERY dark storm clouds in the distance, and we got back to Southwild just as the storm arrived. This was an especially strong and dramatic Brazilian storm. The wet season was just about to start again in Brazil, and these kinds of storms would soon become more and more frequent. Following the storm, we celebrated a remarkable trip at our farewell dinner, sharing our favorite moments and species from the trip. Almost everyone noted that the group itself was the main highlight, having bonded after such a memorable trip with incredible sightings.

## **Fri., Oct. 21                      Southwild Pantanal to Cuiaba**

We left Southwild after breakfast and headed back to Cuiabá with a bit of roadside birding along the way. Leaving the bumpy, dusty Transpantaneira behind, we made our way to the Cuiabá airport, but not before one more delicious stop a local churrascaria! After some fond farewells and promises to meet up this winter, the main group departed and Steve, Eric, Laura, Wes, Roberto and Magno, who signed up for the extension, set out for one more adventure in the Brazilian Cerrado!

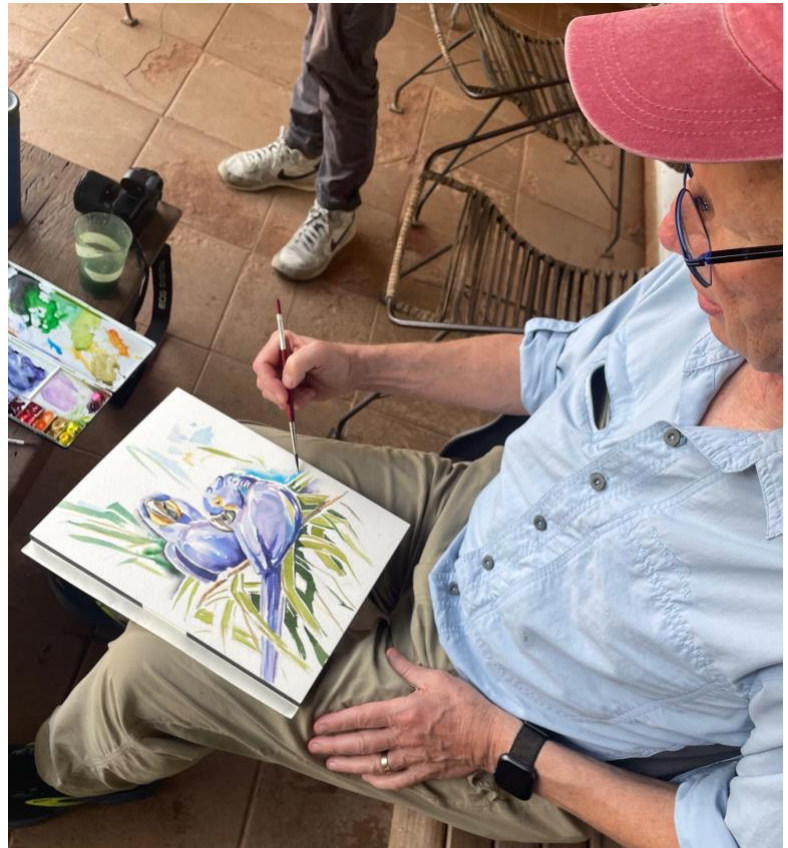


Photo Credits: Group Photo (Jessie Hallstrom - JH), Jaguar (Wes Larson - WL), Hyacinth Macaws (WL), Howler Monkey (WL), Jabiru (WL), Caiman (WL), Toco Toucan (Nathan Welch - NW), Blue-and-yellow Macaw (WL), Capybara (WL), Yellow-billed Cardinal (WL), Plush-crested Jay (WL), Violet-capped Woodnymph (NW), Toco Toucan (WL), Group on boat (JH), Red-legged Seriema (WL), Whistling Heron (WL), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (WL), 6 Banded Armadillo (WL), Plumbeous Ibis (WL), Red-shouldered Macaw (WL), Jabiru & Hyacinth Macaws in Flight (WL), Short-crested Flycatcher (NW), Jessie (WL), Black-and-yellow Macaw (Jeanette Cuthbert - JC), Jabiru (NW), Boating Friends - 1 (JC), Lesser Anteater (WL), Armadillo Friend (JC), Boat Friends (JC), Tiger Heron (WL), Giant Anteater (WL), Birding by Boat (JC), Band-tailed Manakin (WL), Frog (WL), Crab-eating Fox (WL), Giant River Otter (WL), Yellow-rumped Cacique (WL), Rhea (WL), Jaguar (WL), Jaguar Close-up (WL), River Scenic (WL), Jaguar (WL), Jaguar stalking (WL), Jag through the grass (WL), Jag paw print comparison (JH), Jaguar spotting! (WL), Ocelot (WL), Little Blue Heron (WL), Rufous Kingfisher (WL), Check out that view! (WL), Scarlet Macaw (WL), Little Owl (WL), Lettered Aracari (WL), Stunning Paintings by David Welch