

Brazil's Pantanal: Jaguars! & More

July 7 – 17, 2023 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With guide, Wes Larson and participants Carey, Deb, Frederick, Gary, Gayle, Harriet, James, Jim, Mariel, Philip and Roy



Fri., Jul. 7 Sao Paulo

We met as a group this evening at the Marriott near the Sao Paulo Guarulhos Airport. After a few especially strong caipirinhas, the group began talking about our shared love for all things wild over a delicious Brazilian dinner. Some had traveled to a nearby ecological park during the day, where they were lucky to see some good mammals (Coati, Marmoset) and also a lot of birds, including Campo Troupial and an unidentified oriole. It was a great start to the trip, and it was already easy to tell that this group would deeply appreciate the wildlife sightings that the Pantanal had in store for us.



Sat., Jul. 8 Sao Paulo to Campo Grande to Aguapé

The Guarulhos Airport is quite hectic this time of year, and we learned that first-hand this morning! But luckily, we had a group that knew how to navigate stressful situations and we made our flight to Campo Grande. Upon our arrival, we met Benedito, our local guide, and we piled into our van and headed out toward the southern Pantanal. A quick stop for some Brazilian snacks ended up being quite productive when it came to birds, as we saw several parrot species including three types of macaws: Red-shouldered, Blue-and-yellow and Red-and-green! We also saw Yellow-faced Amazons and Yellow-chevrons Parakeets. Further down the road we made a second stop and were thrilled to see Chestnut-eared Aracari and Toco Toucans! Even the most routine of stops in the Pantanal can yield great birds!

As we continued onto the dirt road leading to Aguapé, we had more good sightings including our first look at Greater Rhea, a great Golden-collared Macaw and several species of ibis. Everywhere we looked there was a new bird, and our group was beginning to appreciate the magic of the Pantanal in the dry season! We started to see capybara and other more common mammals, but the group was very focused on spotting the giant anteater. As we neared the Aguapé area, we briefly saw one crossing the road, but not everyone saw it. Worrying that that may have been our only chance to see this massive and beautiful anteaters, we rounded a corner and found not one but two adult anteaters feeding and walking only a few hundred yards away from each other! An incredible experience, but it wouldn't be our last! A few miles down the road we saw the second anteater species, the lesser tamandua, right next to the road! Generally shy, this anteater allowed us to watch it forage for ants and termites in an open field, and we couldn't believe our good luck. As luck would have it, we also had our first sighting of Hyacinth Macaws as a few flew over our heads.

We continued our drive to Aguapé and were greeted by flocks of both Hyacinth and Blue-and-yellow Macaws, as well as wonderful looks at a variety of parakeets and other birds on the Aguapé feeders. Six-banded Armadillos ran in and out of the holes around the buildings, and we had the distinct feeling that we were in a wildlife paradise. After settling into our rooms, we went out on our first safari and saw Aplomado Falcons, Jabiru and many other birds as well as Yacare Caiman, Capybara and Nine-banded Armadillo. It was hard to know where to look!



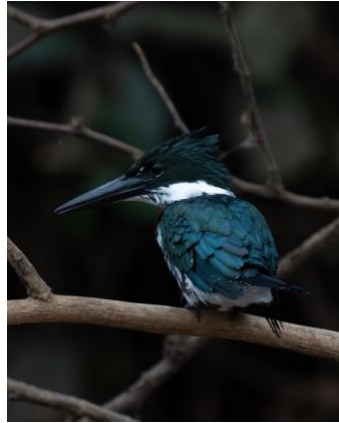
Even though it had been a long day, our group was excited at dinner to relive the incredible sightings that we had throughout the day. We even got lucky finding a cat-eyed snake right before dinner. A truly magical first day in the southern Pantanal.

Sun., Jul. 9 Full day at Pousada Aguapé

At breakfast we were surrounded by macaws, parakeets, Plush-crested Jays, cardinals, aracaris and many other birds. And of course, the Armadillos were darting between tables. Following breakfast, we left for an early morning safari around the mixed wetland, savannah and gallery forest ecosystems of the ranch. We had a lot of great bird sightings including Vermillion Flycatcher, Roadside Hawk, Toco Toucan, Chotoy Spinetail, Masked Gnatcatcher, Grey-cowled Wood-Rail and many others. We also saw lots of Capybara, Caiman, Pampas Deer and other non-feathered wildlife. We relaxed for a few hours around the Aguapé Lodge, with some of the guests taking advantage of a rather unique swimming pool where one can swim while watching huge, wild macaws. Birding at the lodge itself is quite productive, and some from the group explored around the lodge during our downtime.

Our afternoon safari was especially incredible, with more amazing sightings of both Giant and Lesser Anteaters. This Giant Anteater had recently been released from a rehab; a tamandua project based out of Aguapé. Other great wildlife sightings included a really nice look at Bat Falcons that were using a Hyacinth Macaw nesting box and a beautiful Capped Heron in the still water beside the road. We also stopped to admire some cattle that were watching the group intently in a cloud of their own dust that was glowing in the sunlight -- beautiful even if it was just cows! During the afternoon safari we saw Burrowing Owls, Aplomado Falcons, a Crane Hawk and Howler Monkeys.

The food at Aguapé is always good, but tonight we had traditional Brazilian barbeque, or churrasco, and it was a truly delicious meal with some great company. After dinner, Wes led a smaller group down to the river for a short night walk, and we observed a number of frogs and bats along the way. We also had a quick lesson on southern astronomy from both Tad and local guide Benedito before heading back to the lodge for a well-earned rest.



Mon., Jul. 10 River Trip at Aguapé and Travel to Campo Grande

Early in the morning, after a tasty Aguapé breakfast, we set off on the Aquidua River, just down the road from the lodge. It felt great to be on the river and see the riparian birds not present in the forests and meadows around the ranch. From the boat we saw a crazy amount of Toco Toucans, many Green and Amazon Kingfishers, Cormorants, Anhingas, Cocoi and Striated Herons, Silver-beaked Tanagers, Orange-backed Troupials and the incredibly beautiful Band-tailed Manakin. We even saw a Howler Monkey or two, making the trip a wonderful goodbye to the Aguapé pousada that had treated us so well for the past two days.

After lunch we said our goodbyes and headed out on the road. We thought most of the excitement was over for the southern Pantanal, but we were wrong. Just as people started to fall asleep, Wes spotted our first Giant Anteater of the day quickly followed by five more in quick succession! Six(!) Giant Anteaters on our drive! We couldn't believe our good luck. We arrived at the hotel Mohave and had an early bedtime as we would be getting up super early the next morning for our trip to the northern Pantanal.

Tues., Jul. 11 Travel to Cuiaba and Pousada Piuval

We woke VERY early to catch our flight to Cuiaba with a layover in Brasilia. Luckily, this group knows how to stay on schedule and the flights went as smoothly as they possibly could. In Cuiaba, we met our driver and settled into our amazing minibus for the drive to Pousada Piuval. Many of us were quite sleepy so there was a fair amount of napping on the way.

The beautiful surroundings and plentiful wildlife of Piuval woke us up though. From the pousada itself, one can observe dozens of species of wetland birds, mammals and reptiles. It's a truly incredible place, and we got a better feel for it before dinner by taking an extended afternoon drive. We were fortunate to see red-footed tortoise and we had a great look at some Sun Bitterns and our first Azara's Agouti sighting as well! We had heard that a Jaguar had recently been seen in the area, and while we did our best to locate it, the cat eluded us.



Piuval is a beautiful place where the dense forest gives way to open wetland -- quite spectacular. We were treated to a particularly beautiful sunset right after seeing a Greater Rhea and a Great Potoo, and everyone was looking forward to having an entire day at the pousada the following day.

Wed., Jul. 12 Full Day at Pousada Piuval

We woke up to eat a delicious breakfast at Pousada Piuval, then headed out for a combination walking/driving tour. It ended up being a very productive safari. We saw a really active Azara's Capuchin, and had nice looks at Black-fronted Nunbirds, a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, a Tody Flycatcher and many other great birds and mammals. Piuval is a beautiful pousada situated where sprawling ranch meets the lush forest and wetlands, and everywhere you turn on the pousada a new surprise awaits.

The temperatures were quite warm, so after the morning tour we decided to relax, resting in our rooms and enjoying the beautiful Piuval pool. In the early evening we headed back out into the area surrounding the pousada with the hope of seeing a Jaguar. As it would turn out, we came VERY close to seeing a Jaguar at the pousada but were just a minute too late! Still, we had an absolutely beautiful evening and managed to see many beautiful birds, mammals and reptiles including Undulated Tinamou, Black-and-white Tegu, Gray Brocket Deer and Great Black Hawks. Another unforgettable day full of great wildlife in the beautiful Pousada Piuval.

Thurs., Jul. 13 Travel to Porto Jofre and First Jaguar Safari

We woke early to travel toward the Transpantaneira and our final destination of Porto Jofre and our floating houseboat hotel. A lovely sunrise was our goodbye to the beautiful Piuval, and we headed out on the dusty, bumpy Transpantaneira Highway. We stopped at both the main sign and a nearby bridge to take some photos and do some birding, and we picked up some new birds, including our first Black-capped Donacobius and a Purple Gallinule. There was construction near the end of the highway, and we had a small window to get through, so we had to make keep moving to avoid being delayed. Along the way we had some interesting sightings including our first Marsh Deer, a Terrapin that Wes helped across the road, and a Tyra! Pretty amazing considering we weren't doing much stopping. As we approached Porto Jofre, the weather changed dramatically with an approaching that had been forecasted. And it sure got chilly and cloudy quick! By the time we boarded the houseboat hotel, a brisk wind was blowing, and we realized that our night search for Jaguars might be quite



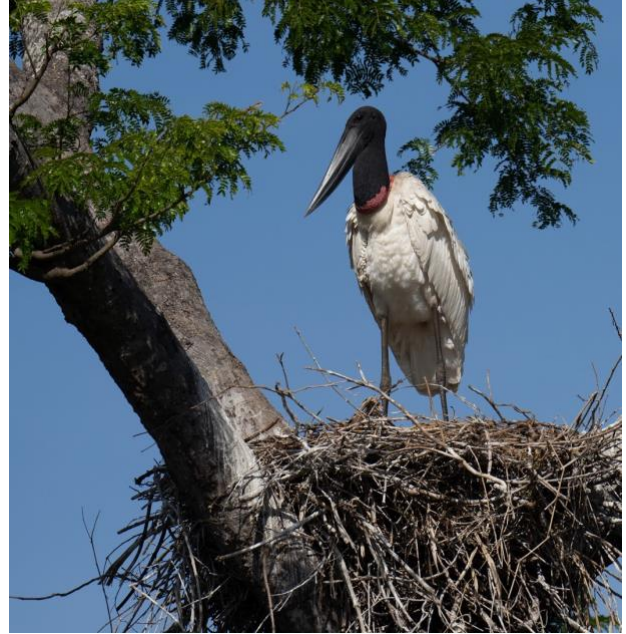
chilly. But we didn't let the cold stop us as we set out on the boats in search of the world's third biggest cat. Just as it got really dark and we started to lose hope, we rounded a corner and saw our first Jaguar, a huge male that was peering out of the brush and over the water! He moved to the other side of a small peninsula, giving us time to watch him for a while before he moved out of view. On the return to the houseboat, we encountered a group of Giant River Otters, a nice treat to cap off the night. It was Wes's birthday, so we all ate some cake and sang him happy birthday while we re-lived the day's adventures.

Fri., Jul. 14 Full Day of Jaguar Safaris

Today would be our first full day of Jaguar safaris and luckily the weather had greatly improved from the previous day. We set out on the boats early in the morning and it didn't take long to hear our first call on the radio for Jaguar activity. We arrived just in time to view a female prowling the riverbank looking for food for a reported cub, likely tucked away back in the forest. We watched the powerful cat for almost half an hour when another call came in from a spot just down the river. A few minutes later we were treated to our best Jaguar sighting of the trip. A beautiful female Jaguar was hunting on exposed logs over the water, and we watched as she jumped from log to log, prowling the riverbank. It was an emotional experience for some, and the long trip to the end of the Transpantaneira was well worth the effort.

Elated by our incredible back-to-back Jaguar sightings, we made our way back to the boat for lunch, and on the way, we had close-up views of three giant river otters on the riverbank. We watched them play with each other for over ten minutes before they silently slipped back into the water.

Lunch was more even more animated than usual as we relived the incredible Jaguar experiences, trading pictures and grinning ear to ear. But the day was far from over! We still had an afternoon safari to go on, and as we loaded onto the boats, we listened intently to the sounds of the forest. Soon we had our first great looks at Rufous-bellied Jacamar, Boat-billed Heron and a few other new species. And then a radio call came in and once again we sped off in search of Jaguar. Our final Jaguar sighting of the trip was shared with several boats, still it was a particularly beautiful individual that was laying down on a bank high above the river and lit by golden light. It was a poignant reminder of just how graceful and beautiful these animals can be, and we went back to the houseboat incredibly satisfied and enjoyed a round of caipirinhas to celebrate.



Sat., Jul. 15

Travel to Mato Grosso Hotel

We woke up early and headed out on one last jaguar safari. While the cats were nowhere to be seen, we did get lucky to see a Neotropical River Otter, often a difficult species of otter to find in the Pantanal. We also got to spend a bit more time with its bigger cousins, the Giant Otters, watching as one playful individual ate several fish right in front of us. A beautiful morning, full of wildlife, and even though we were not lucky with another Jaguar sighting, it was a wonderful farewell to the Meeting of the Waters State Park. Little did we know, but we would have another big cat sighting later that night.

Back in Porto Jofre, we loaded into the van and headed down the bumpy and dusty highway toward Hotel Mato Grosso. Some of the bridges along the highway were under construction, so we didn't have much flexibility to stop. But we did make one stop to see a beautiful Scarlet-headed Blackbird that Benedito spotted from the van.

Arriving at Mato Grosso, we settled into our rooms and some of the group went on a small nature walk along the Pixiam River. We identified several new bird species including the Pearly-vented Tody-Flycatcher, and we also found fresh Tapir tracks. A few people listed tapirs as one of their main targets for the trip, and thus far the large mammals had proved elusive. But after dinner we went on a night drive to search for Tapirs in the marshes surrounding Mato Grosso Hotel.

We departed at 8 p.m., and not long into the drive, Roy called out that he had seen eye-shine on the road ahead. Wes and Benedito immediately shined lights in that direction, and in near disbelief, Wes said that a Puma had just crossed the road! Everyone jumped to the side of the safari vehicle staring into the darkness, and seconds later our spotlights caught up with it, giving everyone about 30 seconds to appreciate this extremely elusive big cat of the Pantanal. It was a rare sighting that none of us had expected, an amazing addition to a trip that was full of people wanting to see the charismatic mammals of the Pantanal.

Sun., Jul. 16

Full Day at Mato Grosso

After breakfast, some of the group went on a short walk near the Pixiam River. We were lucky to find some new species, with a Helmeted Manakin being the star of the show! This charismatic bird was flitting back and forth



over the trail and gave all of us a nice look at his distinctive red “helmet.” While bird life was scarce on the walk, the birds we did see were mostly new ones, and it was nice to get out and use our legs a bit.

The afternoon gave us all some much-needed downtime, and while some of our group continued birding around the Mato Grosso Hotel, others took the time to nap or simply relax at the pool. In the afternoon we loaded into some small boats to cruise the river, and we had the lucky distinction of being the first group this year to see an Agami Heron! These beautiful, skittish herons are a rare sighting even in the Pantanal, and everyone in our boats was thrilled to get brief looks at the heron. Other highlights on the boat tour included capuchin monkeys, howler monkeys, Black-collared Hawks and lots and lots of kingfishers. The Pixiam River provides somewhat different habitat from both the Aquiduaana River and the Cuiaba River, and it was nice to be on a boat birding again.

After our farewell dinner, we voted for our favorite mammal and bird of the trip (Jaguar and Agami Heron), then set out on one last night safari. Aside from some nice stars, the safari was not terribly productive, until, of course, we had one last great surprise: a Pantanal Cat! These small cats are often called ghosts of the Pantanal because they are so rarely seen, and although our sighting was brief, it seemed fitting that our group, that had been so lucky up until this point, would have one last amazing sighting.

Mon., Jul. 17 Return to Cuiaba and Flights Home!

After some quick birding at the hotel and a few fleeting sightings as we drove out of the Pantanal, we arrived at the airport with time for a final meal at the airport grill before our departing flights.

This was an incredible group with a great attitude and insane luck! It’s not often that a group sees three different cat species, over 200 birds AND 10 Giant Anteaters, but luck was certainly not in short supply for this tour. Thank you all for making this a pleasant and truly memorable trip, and I hope to do more traveling with you all soon!

Photos: Group Photo (Wes Larson - WL), Jaguar (WL), Cocoli Heron (WL), Yacare Caiman (WL), Pantanal Scenic (Harriet Allen - HA), Blue-and-yellow Macaw (Debbie Ellinger - DE), Chestnut-eared Aracari (WL), Tufted Capuchin (DE), Jabiru (WL), Giant Anteater (WL), Morning Ride (WL), Hyacinth Macaw (WL), Greater Rhea (WL), Burrowing Owl (WL), Lesser Anteater (WL), Capybara & Young (DE), Green Kingfisher (WL), Blue-crowned Trogon (WL), Howler Monkey (DE), Bat Falcon (WL), Dusty Evening Cows (WL), Egrets in flight (WL), Lineated Woodpecker (WL), Caped Heron & Caiman (WL), Jaguar (WL), Enjoying the boat ride! (HA), Giant River Otter (WL), Chestnut-bellied Guan (WL), Ipe Tree (HA), Proboscis Bats (WL), Jabiru on Nest (WL), Black-capped Capuchin Monkey (WL), Bare-faced Curassow (WL)