

## Tour Report Best of Brazil 16 June – 4 July 2025

Puma



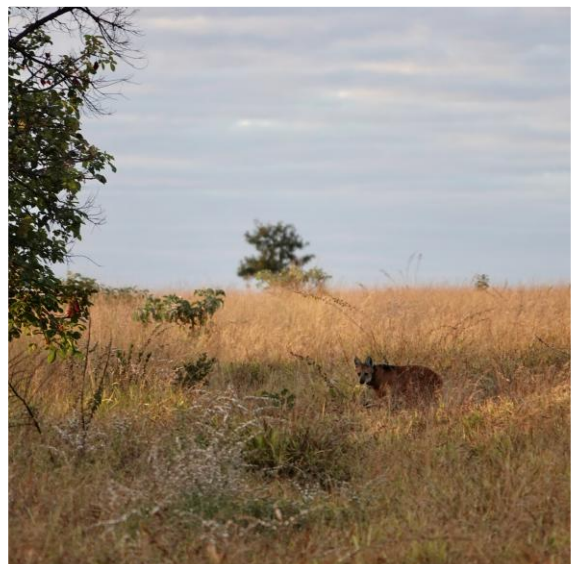
Red and green macaw



Jaguar



Maned wolf



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Boasting almost 2,000 bird species and just shy of 800 mammals, Brazil's fantastic biodiversity is much celebrated, and deservedly so. On this superb itinerary, we visit three of the country's six biomes on an epic adventure to find as much wildlife as possible. Appealing to anyone with a general interest in the natural world, it is important to note that we spend a lot of time birding, and our species list is testament to that, with birds tending to outnumber mammals ten to one over the last few years.

We start in the beautiful Brazilian savannah, the Cerrado, where ecotourism is relatively new and where finding mammals, especially, can be challenging. If you're up for it, though, here we search for the alluring and incredibly shy maned wolf. Some individuals are collared, and we have the chance to accompany researchers, watching conservation in action as they use telemetry and drones to facilitate sightings (although these, of course, are not guaranteed).

Next, we head to the impossibly brilliant Amazon, where the amount and variety of life has to be seen to be believed. From the comfort of our stunning lodge, we throw ourselves into a verdant wonderland, taking to the water, hiking trails and climbing 50-metre-tall canopy towers for sunrise and sunset, in our efforts to uncover the area's wildlife secrets. From primates to reptiles and insects to bats, come and explore this magnificent birding hotspot with us.

Our final stop is the fabulous South Pantanal, where we start with a visit to Buraco das Araras, a sinkhole brimming with red-and-green macaws who will fly at eye level or below you, their rainbow plumage a sight to behold. Next, we invite the jaguar and giant anteater to take centre stage from our base at Refugio Caiman. Through morning and afternoon open vehicle safaris (for boat safaris you need to visit the north Pantanal), we traverse lush tropical surrounds intermixed with working cattle land whilst enjoying bush breakfasts and dinners too. A myriad of wildlife awaits us, and we embrace it with open arms!

**Monday 16 June 2025**

### **Day 1: London Heathrow to São Paulo**

Tour Leader Helen met the group at London Heathrow onboard our LATAM overnight nonstop flight to São Paulo.

**Tuesday 17 June 2025**

### **Day 2: São Paulo to Brasilia**

*Weather: sunny and clear, 24°C*

11 hours and 40 minutes later, we landed ahead of schedule at 04:45 local time and quickly passed through Immigration before waiting for our checked baggage to arrive. We then cleared Customs, headed upstairs to Terminal 2 to drop our bags off for our connecting flight to Brasilia, passed through Security, and grabbed a bite to eat, all with time to spare.

On arrival in the capital, we were met by an absolute character, Juan, and driver Miguel, who whisked us to our overnight accommodation at the Windsor Plaza Hotel just 30 minutes away. With a running commentary on the planning and layout of Brasilia, it was an informative transfer after which we checked in and relaxed in our recently refurbished rooms. The group opted out of an organised city tour, preferring to spend the afternoon at leisure. For some, that involved catching up on some much-needed sleep, whilst others went sightseeing on foot, visiting the TV Tower, Dom Bosco (the incredible blue church) and the cathedral. Birding along the way, staple species such as rufous hornero, chalk-browed mockingbird, southern lapwing, great kiskadee and black vulture got the species list off to a flying start (if you'll excuse the pun) as did the addition of blue-and-yellow macaw, yellow-chevroned parakeet and swallow-tailed hummingbird. We met up for dinner together in the hotel's restaurant at 19:00, after which we gratefully fell into our beds.

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Wednesday 18 June 2025

### Day 3: Brasilia to Trijuncao

Weather: sunny and clear, cloud building up later, 27°C

We set off at 08:00 after a fabulous buffet breakfast and a surprise sighting of a squirrel cuckoo right outside our hotel. Splitting between two SUVs, we clocked up an impressive number of birds during our six-hour journey to Pousada Trijuncao, including burrowing owl, buff-necked ibis, snowy egret, toco tucan, roadside hawk, ruddy ground dove, greater rhea and numerous unidentified parakeets. Reptiles also made an appearance as a giant ameiva lizard, complete with bright green markings, darted into the grass cover during one comfort break.

Upon reaching Pousada Trijuncao, we received a warm welcome from General Manager Joao, and naturalist guide, Vini, and were serenaded by chopi blackbirds, chalk-browed mockingbirds and pretty scaled doves. First impressions were excellent as we were shown to our beautiful rooms, simply and naturally furnished, in order to drop off bags before meeting in the restaurant for lunch. Once we'd ordered from the a la carte menu, Joao took us through an introduction to lodge life. Blue-and-yellow macaws heralded the arrival of our tasty meals, and after eating, Helen took the group on a brief familiarisation walk around the lodge.



A little later, having been distracted by black-tufted marmosets in the garden along with sayaca and palm tanagers, we collated in Reception, where we met biologists Maju and Isabella from the wildlife NGO Oncafari. Based here permanently and researching maned wolves, they introduced us to both the reserve and to our target species. Half an hour later, we were champing at the bit to get going with them as we eagerly clambered aboard their open-sided and roofed six-seater vehicle and set off on our first excursion.

With Isabella in the driving seat, Maju explained that we would look for a male and female pair, Barao and Savana, who had recently had pups. Both collared, she advised that the antenna on the front of the car picks up a signal for them within a one-kilometre range. She told us more about their usual habits and advised that we head towards their latest den site to check for movement. As we drove, we took in the dry and low scrubby bush featuring both narrow and broad-leaved vegetation. Some looked very familiar, akin to African bush willows and apple leaf; others looked like mimosa and frangipani. Termite mounds of all shapes and sizes littered the earth, some grey, some brick red, and others bleached white. Egg-shaped tree termite nests were also evident in abundance, many positioned in the forks of trees and others built atop branches, reaching the size of giant tortoises!

We reached a vast open area, dominated by purple flowering shrubs (*Macairea radula*), and flanked by dense thickets of moriche palms in the distance. The totem pole-like frondless skeletons of old palm trunks stood sentinel, providing roosting perches for blue-and-yellow macaws who screeched noisily and repetitively as they flew in. Maju set up her telemetry set and picked up signal, but it was weak, so she suggested we sit tight for a while, and while we did, she would fly a drone to try and pick up visual for our pair. It was fascinating to watch the landscape ahead of us now unfold on video beneath the drone, and to discover clear trails through the undergrowth made by the wolves that we simply wouldn't be able to see from ground level. She switched the screen from a regular view to thermal imagery and the termite mounds



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lit up the screen. With no sign of the wolves, she landed the drone as we watched conservation in action. It was fascinating.

As Savana's signal suggested, she wasn't up and mobile yet, so we went looking for Barao. Dusk was falling and as we passed the lodge, we stopped at a road junction to see if we could pick a signal up when Maju calmly pointed out a giant anteater in the road ahead. What?! We couldn't believe it as the shaggy tail of the individual moved off into the bush. We'd all seen it, albeit briefly, and we were told it was a juvenile who had recently left the security of its mother. We wished it well after learning that in this neck of the woods, they are a favoured prey species for jaguars. Having checked once more, the signal for Barao was weak so we returned to the den site and fortuitously, Savana appeared to be up and about!

By this time, it was dark, night falling rapidly due to a buildup of cloud cover limiting any sunset colours. As we scanned the area in front of us with a spotlight, we excitedly exclaimed, "Eye shine!" Sure enough, we confirmed it was Savana through her collar signal and we watched the outline of her back move across the front of our vehicle, some distance away, towards our left. Maned wolf on our first outing? This was totally unexpected and utterly fabulous!

With adrenaline levels spiking, we re-positioned to a nearby road, hoping she might cross it. Maju, meanwhile, was multitasking with aplomb, holding the spotlight and the telemetry set, moving them constantly to maintain Savana's whereabouts, and directing Isabella where to go. Returning to our previous point, she confirmed that Savana was still there, but had changed direction. We set off after her slowly and suddenly she appeared calmly walking ahead of us on the road. Her black lower legs stood out against the red earth of the road and her white bushy tail enabled us to follow her. Yes!

We lost her shortly thereafter, but due to incredible tracking from Maju once again, we stopped and waited and she walked parallel to us, out of the darkness and then directly across the road in front. She was ridiculously relaxed. We lost her again, but continued to follow her progress through telemetry. A very cute, and very tiny rat ran across the road, hunkering down by a patch of grass next to us, keeping us well entertained for a while, after which we continued and would you believe it, Savana appeared one more time, walking in the road once more. Wow. Just wow.

The jewels of the Milky Way dazzled above us and we returned home on an absolute wildlife high. What an extraordinary start, especially after Helen had been very careful to set expectations as mammals can be more than challenging to find here! A superb meal and celebratory beer followed before we hit the hay as we had an early start in store tomorrow.

**Thursday 19 June 2025**

#### **Day 4: Grande Sertao Veredas National Park and afternoon safari**

*Weather: sunny, 27°C*

Following breakfast at 05:30, we boarded our safari vehicle half an hour later, this time with lodge naturalist Vini at the helm. He immediately picked up on a crab-eating fox walking down the road ahead of us, which quickly moved off into the bush. As night gave way to day, he spotted a lone pampas deer as peach-fronted parakeets squawked in the sky above. Our destination this morning was Grande Sertao Veredas National Park, the northernmost area of which is exclusively reserved for Pousada Trijuncao guests. As we approached the access road, Fazenda Santa Luzia appeared on our left, and a bird frenzy ensued! Aplomado

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falcon, white-rumped monjita, white-rumped tanager, white-tailed hawk, rufous-fronted thornbird, black-throated saltator and stunning coal-crested finch all made an appearance. Two more crab-eating foxes were spotted moving through the grass towards the road, which they crossed before disappearing into the park.

The single red bottle-brush type flowers of calliandra drew our attention, as did yellow senna and purple gorse-like diplusodon. The freshest of fresh ocelot tracks trotted down the road and we came across our first fork-tailed palm swifts, known here as pirate birds due to their

tendency to steal feathers off the backs of flying birds (yes, really!) that are then used to line their nests. We followed a drainage line, thick with fruit-laden palm trees, on the lookout for sheltering mammals such as deer, maned wolf, puma, tapir and jaguar. We found old tracks for the final two, but otherwise concentrated on birds. Vini was thrilled to find and show us two collared crescent chests, a much sought-after species for bird enthusiasts here. We also loved the gorgeous raspberry plumage of red-and-green macaws who stole the show as lesser yellow-headed vultures soared the thermals above. White woodpeckers flew from tree to tree, and we tasted the flowers of lippea, excellent in G&T apparently!



We stopped for coffee, juice and snacks, then retraced our steps out of the park, stopping to admire two blue-and-yellow macaws perched atop a dead palm tree trunk, shining vividly in the strong sunshine. Movement in the road ahead caught our attention, and it turned out to be a six-banded armadillo. Incredibly speedy, it shot through the undergrowth and disappeared! It was a juvenile, belied by its slightly orange colouring, and so enamoured with it were we that Vini tried very hard to find us more during the course of the morning.

Although unsuccessful, we were very impressed as we drove through the grape-laden vines marking the entrance to Fazenda Santa Luzia, which falls under the Trijuncao umbrella, passing red-legged seriemas ambling through them. We learnt about the sustainable agricultural practices being pioneered here. In addition to carbon-neutral beef (they are planting fast-growing eucalyptus trees to absorb the gases emitted by cattle), and chickens, who keep the lodge kitchen equipped with eggs, there were also sheep, olive trees, pomelo, dragonfruit cactus and banana plants, plus a vanilla plantation.



The fields and crops were alive with cattle tyrant, grassland sparrow and guira cuckoo. We even came across a female vermilion flycatcher, although there was no sign of its more flamboyant male mate. Southern rough-winged swallows and greater rheas accompanied us on the home stretch back to the lodge, and after six hours in the field, we all agreed it had been a fabulous first morning's drive! We then tucked into lunch at our leisure and enjoyed some downtime before heading out again at 16:30.

We slowly drove west initially, stopping to view a very cooperative white-eared puffbird spotted by a client.

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Sitting in a tree at eye level, we were able to get a good look at its kingfisher-like characteristics before becoming distracted by a lowland hepatic tanager fly by and then four campo flickers, with their distinctive egg yolk coloured throats, perched in a tree. A pair of courting yellow-faced parrots captured our imagination as they bowed to each other, stretching their necks tall and generally behaving in quite an endearing manner. We passed the abandoned scrubby hanging nests of rufous-fronted thornbirds and a southern crested caracara left its stationary perch to fly back to its nest and feed its chick in the distance. It was proving to be a peaceful and serene drive with dusk a longer, more drawn-out and gradual affair than we had experienced yesterday. Yellow hues on the horizon deepened to orange and then darkness prevailed. Vini was feeling a little affronted at the lack of mammal life but little did he know that nocturnal birds were about to put on quite a show.

It started quietly enough with a common pauraque quickly followed by a number of stunning scissor-tailed nightjars flying into the night, the long tail feathers of the males quite a sight to behold. We then stumbled across a common potoo, but common was the last thing we would use to describe it. Was it an extension of the post it was sitting still and silent upon? We almost wondered if it was stuffed (!) as we rolled closer and closer to it and it simply didn't budge. It finally blinked and as we got to within metres of it, it looked as though its huge yellow eye and dark pupil had been stuck on. Helen likened it to a liquorice allsort, it was so strange! We eventually left it to its own devices and ambled back towards the lodge, picking up the eye shine of Cuvier's dwarf caiman as we followed the banks of a lagoon.



We were almost home when a repeated call stopped us in our tracks and we switched the engine off quickly. With senses on full alert, we sat up straighter listening to the roaring bark of a maned wolf. We rushed towards the sound, extending our drive happily, and coming across tracks, but there was no sign of the owner, so we headed back for another delicious dinner. What a rush. Vini was clearly still a little disappointed at the quiet drive but we'd had a lovely afternoon. Sometimes the bush gives, sometimes it doesn't, but it is always a pleasure to try. We also knew that we'd seen a wolf last night, had heard one tonight, so what on earth would tomorrow have in store?!

**Friday 20 June 2025**

### **Day 5: Morning and afternoon safaris**

*Weather: sunny with scattered clouds, 27 °C*

We met at 05:45 for coffee and cake before our planned birding walk at 06:00. Vini had a point to prove, however (to himself, certainly not to us), and wanted us to switch to a vehicle safari to maximise our chances of finding mammals as well as birds. It was a good decision. No sooner had we set off when we heard those magic words, "I see a maned wolf!"

We were perhaps three or four hundred metres from the lodge and sure enough, there was movement through the grass to our right. We stopped to see what it would do. It stayed still, so we reversed slightly, ensuring that everyone had a good view in the low morning light. Its right ear clearly bent forward, a distinguishing factor, and we were advised that this was a young male, born last year, and he was probably responsible for the roaring barking heard this morning by a few of our party at half past four. He seemed to disappear in front of our eyes, so we re-positioned, driving to the other side of the open patch we'd seen him in.

Tracks just a few hours old were on the road as we drove in a large circle, trying to relocate him but we were unsuccessful. We'd all seen him, though, had felt that surge of adrenaline once again, and were happy. We

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were happier still a few moments later when a hog-nosed skunk was pointed out very close to our vehicle. It turned tail and ran into the grass, but again, it had been entirely unexpected and we were grinning as we continued our drive.

The rest of our morning was spent searching for tapir, but it ended up being well and truly dominated by macaws. Laguna das Araras, which translates as Macaw Lagoon, lived up to its name as we drove its length, watching and hearing red-bellied, and predominantly blue-and-yellow macaws for the next few hours. Water levels were low and we stopped regularly to scan the edges and exposed sandbanks for our target animal, as well as anaconda and other wildlife. We were accompanied at all times by the constant squawking and aerial aerobics of the blue-and-yellow macaws, simply stunning creatures. Flying in pairs, in formation, splitting off and coming together like the Red Arrows, resting on beaches and generally causing a fracas, the morning sun lit up every shade of their plumage, to the point where their usually cobalt backs reflected a Maldivian sea. The tops of their heads glowed green and their gold undersides just shone. They were absolutely glorious.



In addition, inquisitive turquoise-fronted Amazons gazed at us as we noted new species galore, including masked gnatcatcher, glittering-bellied emerald, blue-crowned parakeet, great egret and southern scrub flycatcher, to name but a few. Vini heard the scream of a yellow-headed caracara to our left and then spotted one sitting on the top of a tree directly ahead of us. As we approached, it was repeatedly dive bombed by another individual but it stood its ground, only flinching once. How fascinating to watch fisticuffs in the avian world!

woodcreeper, and a close-up look at wolf apple fruits later (a large part of a maned wolf's diet), and we arrived home around 09:00 after a wonderful drive. Following a hearty breakfast, we split up to stroll around the lodge viewing toco toucan, burnished-buff tanager and white woodpeckers on the feeders. We also stumbled across the usual lodge suspects, guinea pigs, black-tufted marmosets, red-legged seriema and bare-faced curassow. The undisputed star of the show, however, was an absolutely adorable seven-banded armadillo who was busy lapping up ground maize behind the watch tower. We were utterly captivated and kept returning to view it throughout the day.

One checkered woodpecker, an upside-down narrow-billed



At 16:00, well rested, we met up with Vini and set off for the national park once again, hoping to potentially come across maned wolf, jaguar and melanistic marsh deer. As we drove through Fazenda Santa Luzia, we stopped for a rufous-tailed jacamar (one had also been seen earlier behind the lodge's pool), an American kestrel and a male vermilion flycatcher. Shortly before entering the park through a different entrance, we heard that a tapir had been seen exactly where we were this morning. Isn't that always the way?! We continued with our plan, though, passing a pair of beautifully displaying Chapada flycatchers, and crested a rise to look down onto a deep, dark green ribbon of dense vegetation lining the valley floor below.

As we approached the wall of palm trees lining the watercourse, their trunks were so closely packed together that it almost looked impenetrable. Wide, low palm fronds seemed to form a barrier to the ancient sanctuary offered inside, and we could only imagine the amount of insect, bird and plant life thriving within its midst. We were on a mammal quest, though, so with the more typical low, deciduous cerrado behind us, we followed the edge of this natural barrier, passing pale-breasted thrushes aplenty and stopping to view

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five toco tucans fly over and rest in the tallest branches of a tree ahead.

On and on we followed the road, coming across ocelot tracks and only turning around as pinks filled the sky with the onslaught of dusk. We enjoyed our first cloudless sunset, the horizon turning tangerine before stars began to appear, their intensity growing until the starscape was nothing short of astonishing. As we left the national park, skirting farmland once more, Vini caught sight of an eye shining low in the road far ahead. He had another maned wolf! We moved towards it but it started to run, just its white tail briefly visible before it veered off into the bush. Numerous nightjars and a common potoo came next, and as we crossed newly ploughed land, ready for edamame beans to be planted, we found a lone pampas deer out in the open. Returning to the reserve, a tropical screech owl flew low overhead and as we neared the lodge, we stopped to observe and follow three crab-eating foxes. Although it had been a quieter afternoon in general, it had been a lovely drive nonetheless.

**Saturday 21 June 2025**

### **Day 6: Morning with Oncafari and afternoon safari**

*Weather: sunny with scattered clouds, 27°C*

A cold start awaited us as we met up with Isabella and Maju from Oncafari this morning at 05:30. They greeted us with the news that they could smell maned wolf urine, likening it to the scent of beer, so we set off full of hope for a sighting. Maju picked up a signal for Savana, and we drove slowly, stopping regularly to check her general direction. We presumed she would most likely be heading towards her den, but it appeared that she was up by Fazenda Santa Luzia, an area she had frequented before giving birth three weeks ago. We had a choice to make. Should we head up there, knowing she may be deep in vegetation, so seeing her may be difficult, or should we drive around hoping to come across other individuals instead? We opted for the former, making the most of their telemetry.

As the sun rose in the east, we found ourselves in a large meadow with a signal suggesting she was just a few hundred metres ahead of us. The grass was long and despite scanning through our binoculars, there was no sign of her until Maju thought she saw her jump. Was she hunting? We certainly hoped so! Maju decided to launch the drone and almost immediately, we could see Savana zigzagging through the grass, jumping in a decidedly fox-like movement, and pouncing on rodent prey. For once, we were thankful that the surrounding fields are being ploughed as it means that rodents move to the grassland for cover, which in turn attracts the wolves.



Maju zoomed in on her screen and it was suddenly like watching an Attenborough documentary. Knowing this was happening out of our usual eyesight, but almost under our nose, was simply fantastic. Looking up every now and again, we would locate the drone above a tree in the distance and scan just below it to see if we could see her back with our naked eyes. We could! She was walking steadily towards the track ahead of us and upon reaching it, she stopped and looked at us, her chestnut coat and black mane beautifully illuminated in the morning light. My word, she was spectacular. She looked in all directions, presumably searching for more prey, and then walked back into the grass. Once again,

we could only see her back, but it was enough for us to follow her progress, and for the next twenty minutes or so, we did exactly that.

Thanking our lucky stars, our hearts were well and truly full when we lost sight of her and with no change to her signal detected, we figured she had laid down to rest. Maju explained that this would be the first time she had slept away from her den, so the puppies would most likely be alone for the day. Leaving her to it, our smiles were wide as we headed back, stopping to view fresh puma tracks along the way. Our last sighting

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of the morning was of four crab-eating foxes crossing the road, one of whom stopped in the shade to bravely stare back at us with curiosity.

Once home and breakfasted, we again relaxed during the heat of the day, strolling around the lodge and using the pool for good measure. At 16:30, we set off on safari with another naturalist, Alan. A guinea pig appeared from a hole in a termite nest and flopped down onto the ground, only to be described as a 'hairy potato', which made us all chuckle. We stopped to view tiny plumbeous seedeaters



crammed onto a spindly tree alongside grassland sparrows and as we passed maned wolf scat on top of termite mounds, Alan explained rather poetically that the seed-rich waste made these mounds into gardens. We liked that. We stopped at the call of a red-shouldered macaw and took so much time trying to locate it that it felt like a 'Where's Wally?' challenge!

A boat-billed flycatcher flew past as we examined snake tracks crossing a road on top of our earlier tyre tracks. Snakes were on the wish list, but it was difficult to work out their direction of travel, so we continued with our drive, coming across a tapir not long afterwards! This was also a sought-after species and we stumbled across it by the side of the road where it moved slowly beneath the low-lying canopy of a broad-leaved tree, with just its branch-like legs and twitching nose occasionally visible. It moved off, so we decided to try our luck approaching it on foot, but our driver noticed it had already crossed the road ahead of us and disappeared into the thickets. Still, we'd seen South America's largest land mammal and literally minutes afterwards came across perhaps the continent's most bizarre animal, a giant anteater. Two in four nights? This was remarkable as most guides here expect to see one on average every year! How lucky were we?

As day gave way to night, our next sighting proved to be a little feisty. We braked suddenly and super spotter Alan pointed out a snake by our rear left tyre. Upon closer inspection, it was a pale fer-de-lance and it had narrowly missed being run over. It was in full defence mode, shaking its tail in warning as it wound its head in tight like a series of hairpin bends. We watched as it sprang forward about a foot or so before moving into a clump of grass on the side of the road, literally disappearing in front of our eyes. A true Houdini and master of camouflage, we left it to its own devices so as not to stress it out any further. Just metres afterwards, we came to a halt again, this time for a burrowing owl in the middle of the road. It ran along the track ahead, stopping every time we slowed, and then continuing when we did. After multiple photographic opportunities, we switched off the headlights, enabling it to move off into the bush.

We couldn't quite believe what a drive we were having, but it wasn't over yet! Shortly after we turned around to start making our way home, a seven-banded armadillo scurried ahead of us, also on the road, as though everything was taking the path of least resistance tonight. Once back at the lodge, dinner was a traditional Brazilian BBQ, the meat having been cooked slowly outdoors since mid-morning. It was delicious, served with plenty of accompaniments and a caipirinha too!

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Sunday 22 June 2025

### Day 7: Trijuncao to Cuiaba

*Weather: sunny and clear, 29°C*

A tropical screech owl afforded us a really good look at it, as it was perched on a branch next to our vehicle when we departed on our last drive with Vini at 05:30. Being a true ornithologist, we were on 93 bird species and he was determined we would reach 100 or we wouldn't be allowed to have breakfast! We drove towards Laguna das Araras, where a flock of Muscovy ducks, a greater thornbird, pied-billed grebe and southern beardless tyrannulet edged us closer to our target. It was a truly beautiful morning. Cold, but clear, the hanging crescent moon was accompanied by Venus shining brightly over a thick bank of hazy mist covering the water. As pinks and peachy hues were bleached out of the sky, the grass inflorescence glowed red with the rising sun. The landscape was perfectly reflected in the absolute stillness of the water, and the sound of blue-and-yellow macaws filled the air. We drank in the beauty of our surroundings and another wish came true for two clients, when a horned sungem was spotted flying low over prolific purple flowering shrubs, its white, green and gold plumage positively gleaming in the clear, fresh air.

As we crossed to the other side of the lagoon, we stopped at the decidedly 'chiffchaff' sounding call of another hummingbird, a white-vented violetear. It was singing its heart out and eventually settled for long enough to allow us all a good look at it. We were now one bird away from breakfast and it obligingly came in the form of a pale-breasted spinetail. Hoorah! A blue-black grassquit well and truly sealed the deal, so we headed home and relaxed away the day before our transfer to Brasilia at 15:00.

We clocked up a few more species before departure, the hummingbird fiesta continuing with a sighting of a glittering-throated emerald. A lineated woodpecker made it onto our list and black-tufted marmosets were seen eating a scaled dove, would you believe? We had been so well looked after here and would miss this hidden gem of a lodge, but further adventures lay in store. Departing to the usual gorgeous cacophony of chopi blackbirds, we said our goodbyes mid-afternoon and were back in the capital at 21:00, ready to fly onto Cuiaba for a brief overnight stay. After a seamless transfer to our hotel, we were in bed by 01:00, grateful to have crossed a time zone and gained a precious hour.

Monday 23 June 2025

### Day 8: Cuiaba to Alta Floresta

*Weather: sunny, 34°C*

We departed the Gran Odara at 09:45 after a lie-in and breakfast. Fifteen minutes later, we were back at the airport with plenty of time to spare before our flight north to Alta Floresta. We boarded our private minibus and hit the road for a somewhat bumpy one-hour transfer to the Tele Spires River, passing wattled jacana, green ibis and scarlet macaws along the way. There, we met our naturalist guide, Fabio, and pilot, Jose, who asked us to don our life jackets as we climbed aboard our open motorised canoe and carefully navigated towards the private Cristalino River. A no-fishing and no-hunting conservation zone, we were immediately engulfed by towering, verdant vegetation on either side of us, lianas and branches tumbling down to the water's edge, heavily laden by vines of yellow flowering senna. Below this riparian wonderland, clumps of water hyacinth lay across the water, their white blooms no doubt attracting a myriad of insect pollinators. White-banded, southern rough-winged and white-winged swallows fluttered close to the water surface, whilst swallow-winged puffbirds adorned almost every high bough. Three termite nests, looking remarkably like sloths, occupied lofty positions, a tactic used to avoid giant anteaters, but unlikely to help much against tamanduas.



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We stopped to admire our first green kingfisher, a handsome male showing off his rich chestnut chest band, later followed by a female, and later still, the largest kingfisher here, a ringed kingfisher. White-bellied parrots flew over us, and suddenly the quintessential call of a screaming piha pierced the forest around us. Known as the voice of the Amazon, we grinned, knowing that we were finally here! One of the clients at the front of the vessel then spotted a wake in the water ahead, followed by the appearance of a head. No way, we realised we were in the presence of a neotropical otter! It swam just ahead of us, ducking and diving, then drew level with us, almost escorting us up the river.

The emerald green umbrellas of Cristalino Lodge's pontoon appeared around a bend, and there, waiting for us, was our host, Vini. We followed him up towards the communal area of the lodge, distracted by a troop of tufted capuchin monkeys along the way, and then were formally welcomed with a cold towel, a refreshing drink, and lunch. Afterwards, we were escorted to our rooms and had 45 minutes or so to settle in before our first excursion this afternoon.

At 17:30, we set off from the pontoon, having been treated to a capybara swim by and a hunting sunbittern stalking on a raft of vegetation. Fish had been jumping from the water repeatedly, and we learnt that some are fruit and leaf eaters, so they were likely feeding rather than trying to escape predation. Once on the water, a juvenile rufescent tiger heron was the first star of the show, its utterly gorgeous deep orange and striped colouring living up to its name. Perhaps one of the most beautiful birds here, it was followed by another, a capped heron, which landed on the top of submerged rocks, enabling us to admire its rich creamy colouring, blue bill and lovely head streamers. The light began to fade quickly, the clouds above tinged pink by the setting sun, as an anhinga flew overhead.

Using a spotlight, we began to search for eye-shine and what followed was a reptile extravaganza! We started with a tiny Cuvier's dwarf caiman, followed by an adult of the same species, before the spot of all spots by Fabio, an Amazonian tree boa. Perched on top of a branch, it was a small specimen, but it was fabulous. Soft green and unmoving, we watched it for an age, continued, and came across a spectacled caiman lurking in the shallows. Next up was a boat-billed heron, then a ladder-tailed nightjar, as lightning lit up the sky, we returned to the lodge at 19:00 in time for dinner. It was fish night, meaning BBQ'd catch of the day and a buffet on tap! We sampled the local beer, a perfect match, and headed to bed for an early night, excited for what tomorrow may bring.

**Tuesday 24 June 2025**

### **Day 9: Exploring the Amazon**

*Weather: cloudy with sunny spells, 31°C*

Our first morning in the Amazon proved to be a bit of a showstopper! We had arranged to meet on the pontoon at 07:00 after breakfast and we set off up river for the Brazil Nut Trail. We knew getting there would take around an hour, subject to sightings en route, and these certainly proved to be plentiful. We began with a good look at a spectacled caiman in daylight. Lying at the entrance to a creek, it faced us head-on and then swam towards us before veering off to the right. Red-throated piping guans were close to the water, probably feeding on algae, and chestnut-fronted macaws flew over us in formation.



Swallows, sunbitterns and kingfishers were out in force and as we rounded a bend, Jose brought us to a standstill. Ahead, in the shadows, he pointed out a tapir, its wonderfully rotund backside in full view, as well as another piece of anatomy that told us in no uncertain terms that he was a male! It was standing on the bank, facing away from us, but it turned its head repeatedly, allowing us to admire its distinctive tubular nose.

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We could clearly see the whole animal, and he seemed unfazed by our presence. Amazing! After a minute or two, it headed into the water and swam along the bank, branches obscuring him from a clear view, but then he hauled himself out and walked off up the bank. By this time, we were distracted by a juvenile great black hawk flying from branch to branch next to him, so we didn't notice him trundle off into the forest. What a start!

A little further on, we noticed greenery moving although there was little wind. Watching more closely, we were delighted when a number of white-nosed saki monkeys began moving. Stocky and bulky, it was like watching little bears fly through the canopy. We learnt that they don't have a prehensile tail like many of their peers, but they were moving quickly and with ease through the vegetation.

Once we lost them, Fabio noticed tufted capuchin monkeys directly opposite them on the other side of the river. We watched them too, leaping with aplomb and disappearing. Crikey, we weren't even at the trail yet and we were having a fantastic morning.

At 08:10, we started our walk, entering a green cathedral of trees with aspidistra covering the forest floor as far as the eye could see. Cicada towers lined the path, upright cylinders that can be home to nymphs for up to seventeen years before they emerge, mate and die. A walking palm tree was pointed out, whose roots can move a few centimetres to claim precious shafts of light, followed by a big-bellied palm tree, where tightly clustered roots formed a teepee shape around the base of the trunk, anchoring it during periods of strong winds. Lichen covered almost every surface, as heart-shaped, elliptical, palm, banana and fig tree-shaped leaves proliferated all around. We noticed vines, twisted and tortured, growing from the bottom up, binding trees together that would eventually come tumbling down, taking everything with them in their wake. As a deterrent, our next tree, the lady's leg, employs a clever tactic to stop them getting a grip. Its thin, waxy bark peels off in patches akin to skin coloured stockings coming down.



We passed a hole dug by a giant armadillo on the lookout for roots, ants and termites. The latter were represented by a huge mound next to the trail, across from which was a broken branch festooned with miniature white morning glory-shaped fungus known as wood eels. Next, we were shown the undulating vertical panelling bark of the mosquito tree, so called as larvae are laid in its folds. A tiger-winged butterfly flew by and we discussed the use of aposematic colouring as defence. Paths carved out by peccaries through the forest became more prevalent due to a salt lick not far away, and we stopped to observe a huge leaf-cutter ant nest, although the elevated piece of earth we were looking at was just the tip of the iceberg. A veritable city of life was going on right beneath our feet, conducted by these farmers of the forest.



We continued past a spiky palm known in the local indigenous language as (phonetically) 'tulum-i-e', complete with clusters of deep green, hairy, blueberry-sized fruits held in tightly packed clusters, before finally reaching a Brazil nut tree estimated to be between 800-1200 years old. Its girth was enormous and its height was estimated to be 50 metres high. Forest-dwelling bees pollinate the creamy flowers, and the kernels drop to the ground in December. A tiny hole in the kernel, where it was attached to the tree, is excavated by agouti, the only animal that can gain access to the 12-30 seeds inside. They bury their wares like squirrels, often forgetting where they were cached, and therefore, new trees grow.

Meanwhile, dragonflies and mosquitoes lay their eggs in the discarded kernels that fill up with rain water, as does the Brazil Nut poison dart frog, whose tadpoles later feed on the larvae. It really is a remarkable chain of events.

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Leaving the tree and its inhabitants behind us, we crossed a large ground root that looked like a twirled rhythmic gymnast's ribbon and carried on with our walk. Stepping over confetti, remnants of leaf-cutter ants at work, we made our way to a quiet salt lick where a menagerie of creatures from tapir to peccary, birds to butterflies, and even deer practice geophagia. Supplementing their usual diets with calcium, potassium and other minerals from the soil, we stepped beneath a raised hide there, coming face to face with lesser sac-winged bats resting. We felt the heat coming off an electric ant nest and learnt about Aztec ants too, capable of delivering a nasty bite. We could hear macaws flying above, but couldn't see them due to the dense vegetation.

An informative hour and a half had passed by the time we reached the river again, where a king vulture in all its glory soared above us. As it was still early, we moved upstream, a rainbow in our wake, passing candelabra trees laden with upright, candle-like looking pale yellow blooms to see what else we could find. Greater yellow-headed and black vultures joined the party in the thermals and our bird list increased exponentially with sightings of blue-grey tanager, red-capped cardinal, dusky-billed parrotlets and a tiny but gorgeous black-throated mango. A little later, this was usurped by an absolutely stunning red-necked aracari. Capped herons were plentiful and a fishing spider hugged the underside of a horizontal log, whilst a vertical branch sticking up out of the water was home to eight snoozing long-nosed bats.



Jose found us a paradise jacamar high up in the canopy and just as we decided to motor on, up popped our second neotropical otter of the trip. It swam beside us, between us and the riverbank, and we tried to predict where it might appear after each dive. It kept us on our toes as we tried to follow its progress underwater by searching for escaping air bubbles. We were surprised to learn that they utilise bubble-net feeding to capture prey, like humpback whales. We followed the otter's progress as it crossed to a sandy bank on the other side of the river, ran up onto the beach and proceeded to scent mark, rubbing its face and anal glands into the soil to mark territory. It did this on a second beach,

and we oohed and aahed in utter appreciation.

We continued, passing a skirt tree, aptly named due to literally hundreds of hanging pendulums, and then found a tiny yellow-spotted terrapin clinging to a dead branch sticking out of the water at a 45-degree angle. As we stopped, it jumped into the water, but a scan to the other side of the river came up trumps with a startlingly blue spangled cotinga perched high above us. As we made our way back towards the lodge, we noticed two Geoffroy's side-necked terrapins sunning themselves on a branch and a rock respectively and at 11:45 am, we finally arrived home.

Lunch was accompanied by Madeira parakeets, Amazon race runner lizards and a rather handsome golden tegu strutting through the lawn alongside the deck. Afterwards, we went our separate ways to relax, adding a new mammal, a Guianan squirrel, to our species list. We met Fabio again at 16:15 and eagerly set off along a trail directly from the lodge that would lead us to Canopy Tower I. Walking over a chaos of leaf litter, we passed a series of hives set up to protect native bees and stepped over the tiny, raspberry red flowers of little cocoa. A huge serving bowl-sized piece of fungi caught our eye, and at a piping tree, we saw the seed pod sheath and discovered how tiny tooth-billed wrens scrape out the seeds, distributing them accordingly. Huge coils of lianas, likened to rope and as thick as thighs, crossed the path and we passed the huge buttressed roots of a blood tree, so called due to the colour of its sap.

We commenced the climb up the tower, stopping at the first platform 25-30 metres above the forest floor, which is situated at eye level with the canopy. It was fairly quiet, so continuing to the top, we looked down from 50 metres onto a veritable forest of broccoli florets stretching to the horizon in every direction. After discussing hanging oropendola nests, we scanned the trees for signs of life, clocking up mealy parrots, white-eyed parakeets, white-throated tucan, Spix's guan and piratic flycatcher. As the sun disappeared

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behind a bank of cloud, a rainbow of scarlet macaws flew past in the distance, the vibrancy of their plumage quite incredible despite the lowering light. Not to be outdone, three blue-and-yellow macaws joined in the fun, performing a fly-by so close to us that Tom Cruise in Top Gun would have been proud! As diurnal species gave way to those of the night, we were moved to silence, listening to the vocalisations of birds winding down for the day, especially that of the mourning woodcreeper. It was humbling to be here in this rich and immense environment, but before we lost any more light, we descended to the murky depths below where night had already fallen.



As we made our way back to the lodge on foot in the darkness, army and bullet ants were pointed out, as were a myriad of arachnids, including wolf and banana spiders, tarantula and a fantastic whip scorpion clinging to the exposed roots of a fallen tree. The icing on the cake, however, was coming across a tapir not ten metres away from us. It stood quietly, illuminated by the lights of our head torches, resumed eating and then watched us watching it for a good eight minutes or so before it walked off into the darkness, completely unperturbed by us. We positively waltzed back to the lodge on cloud nine to freshen up before dinner and during our four-course meal, we kept jumping up as bats flew across the star-laden sky, an Amazonian rhino beetle walked past, and finally, we were joined by an agouti. What. A. Day.

**Wednesday 25 June 2025**

### **Day 10: Exploring the Amazon**

*Weather: overcast to start, clearing mid-morning, 34°C*

We were joined during breakfast by both chestnut-eared and curl-crested aracaris as well as a crested oropendula and set off under overcast skies at 06:30 for the Vale Trail. We shrieked with coffee-fuelled laughter (well, most of us did!) as Jose skilfully negotiated a set of rapids upriver from the lodge at speed. At a more leisurely pace, we passed under a swarm of unidentified swifts as well as grey-breasted martin, wood stork and sunbitterns galore. We watched the latter stretch their necks out and listened to their subsequent haunting call as the sun glowed ethereally behind a bank of cloud. It was noticeably cooler, but pleasantly so, as we stopped to view our first grey-necked wood-rail walking along the shoreline.



On the other side of the river, we could see two neotropical otter heads appearing, one on top of the other. Crossing over towards them, there was quite a commotion in the water. They tumbled repeatedly, tails whisking, feet occasionally displayed as they turned right over together, and we realised they must be mating! The male had the female held by the back of her head and constantly pushed her under. We could hear them gasping for breath when coming back up again, and must have sat with them for at least ten minutes. They drifted downstream together and we were distracted by an umbrella bird coming in to land in a tree above them. When it disappeared, we decided

to leave the otters to it and carried on, but wow, what a sighting! We found out later that no other members of staff, some there for more than 30 years, had ever witnessed this before. We had been incredibly lucky.

At 07:45, we clambered off the boat and began our walk. Sidestepping fresh capybara poop, we walked up a few metres into what, for four months of the year, is a flooded forest. The difference in vegetation from what we had experienced yesterday was immediately evident. This was noticeably more dense, with an abundance of vines and lianas dangling between shorter trees with narrower trunks, and a prevalence of

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long, spindly leaves. The trail was gently undulating and we soon came across a few species we recognised in the form of Brazil nut trees and a big-bellied palm. We stopped to look at ant lion traps and a little later, the spines of a tucauma tree that are used by indigenous tribes who lace them with poison from dart frogs and attach them to blow pipes when hunting. We used ropes to climb up a huge granite boulder and emerged into a deciduous forest. We had reached our first viewpoint. Walking over a carpet of yellow flowers produced by the mad cotton tree, we passed pig's nipple trees, akin to knobthorns in Africa. Yellow orchid-looking flowers sat atop aloe-like leaves known locally as rhea shin, and a gorgeous white flower, with multiple flowing tendrils, was identified as embirucu.



We found strangler figs and a ground-growing pineapple bromeliad before continuing along a boulder-strewn trail to a second viewpoint. Passing masked tanager, spangled cotinga, and blackish nightjar en route, paradise jacamars adorned branches high above us and a lone grey hawk perched in full view ahead. Turning back, we learnt about the medicinal uses of yellow-fronted trees, and admired the rich, chocolate coloured bark of garaperu, whose wood is soft enough for macaws to nest in. Avocado-shaped fruits hung like Christmas baubles from kapok trees and the monkey ear tree was pointed out, named as its fruit emulates a primate's ear. We found bare-necked fruit crow, golden-winged parakeet, tapir tracks and the gorgeous red

flowers of *Passiflora cristalino* before reaching the river again at 10:10.

We headed upstream once more, passing a Geoffroy's side-necked terrapin who was covered in vivid orange butterflies as we navigated towards 'Monkey Lake'. Set just behind the river, it is usually frequented by spider monkeys, but we came across a troop of tufted capuchins instead. As we headed home for lunch, we stopped to stroke mimosa leaves, observing them curl closed at our touch, and passed a rock slap in the middle of the river with an amazing ring of green algae around it. Yellow sulphur butterflies flew with us and once back, we came across our first electric blue morphos by the bungalows and restaurant. Utterly striking!

After some well-deserved downtime during the heat of the day, we met up again at 15:30 ready for a kayak downstream to the Tele Spires River. This turned out to be the most sublime experience, slowing right down, drifting with the current, and watching all manner of birds from anhinga to green-and-rufous kingfisher go about their daily business. In two-man and single vessels, respectively, the absence of the sound of an engine allowed us to daydream and take in the absolute beauty of the river, perfectly reflecting the banks above in the late afternoon light. We took our time, reaching our destination, a beach, for sundowners and a swim at around 17:15.

Chairs had been set up for us, the beers were cold, and a platter of olives, nuts, dried fruit, cheese and cold

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meat went down a treat. A yellow-billed tern flew over, followed by a black skimmer and as we prepared to leave, a pied lapwing joined the list of new species, too.

As we returned to the Cristalino River, Fabio encouraged us to look back at the setting sun. A moment later, we yelled to Jose to cut the engine as it was breathtaking! Nothing short of magnificent, this was a moment to savour as shafts of blue sky reflected up into the darkening sky and the river appeared gold. We were speechless, gawping in wonder as we tried to capture the scene on film. Eventually, we tore ourselves away and sped home for dinner under the stars. Once again, what a day!



Thursday 26 June 2025

### Day 11: Exploring the Amazon

*Weather: sunny, 34°C*

There was much anticipation about this morning as our plan was to see the sunrise from the top of Canopy Tower II. Despite the early start, we were raring to go as we crossed the river at 05:00 and followed the 800-metre trail in the dark, walking parallel to a column of leaf-cutter ants hard at work carrying loads of up to twenty or thirty times their body weight back to their underground nest. The repeated cry of a crested owl accompanied us, and we disturbed an unidentified tree creeper tucked into a hole in a tree as other birds flew through the blackness, the flapping of their wings similar to the sound of helicopter blades. We began our ascent, swiftly reaching the first platform at 30 metres above the forest floor. We didn't hang around, continuing to the top as the sky to the east glowed rosy pink.

The deep resonating sound of howler monkeys reached us, calling from some distance away, followed by the higher pitch of spider monkeys in the opposite direction. The day shift had arrived, and the forest was waking up. As light penetrated the inky darkness, flying rivers appeared, the result of mist rising from the Cristalino below, framing islands of forest out to the horizon. This was a special experience indeed. Grinning inwardly, we silently gazed out across the canopy as macaws joined mourning woodcreepers in warming up their vocal cords, and we finally spotted our first channel-billed tucans. Their white-throated cousins joined in the chorus, landing on the tallest branches of the tallest trees and squabbling over space.



As the dimmer switch was ratcheted up, so to speak, screaming piha called with increasing intensity and flocks of mealy and blue-headed parrots flew by, illuminated by the rising sun. White-whiskered spider monkeys were spotted and they became our focus for some time. Walking across branches and swinging with dexterity through the canopy using their prehensile tails, we marvelled at their incredibly long limbs. The sun rose ever higher and we spotted a series of new species: double-toothed kite, red-legged honeycreeper, green oropendola, red-necked woodpecker and Kawall's parrot. By 07:30, it was hot out in the open so we returned to the soothing, cool depths of the forest

floor, coming across a rufous-necked puffbird before crossing the river back to the lodge.

A purple honeycreeper caused much excitement during breakfast, and afterwards, as we walked back towards the jetty to head upriver and check out a salt lick for peccaries, we all looked up at a cacophony of noise coming from directly above us. The racket was being caused by a number of red-throated caracara who hunt together and therefore communicate regularly.

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Once on the water, a large spectacled caiman was seen sunning itself on a bank, and although our short walk across the spongy floor of the seasonally flooded forest did not result in any sightings, we did come across a peccary once back at the lodge. A newborn white-lipped infant with its umbilical cord still evident had been found alone at another salt lick this morning and had been brought to the lodge for safekeeping. Its squeals were heartbreaking but we found out later that, having contacted a local peccary wildlife trust, they were advised to return the youngster to the salt lick when a squadron next moved through the area to see if they would accept it. This they duly did, so all we can hope for is a happy ending for the little one.

Between activities, we relaxed, bird-watched and visited a beach by the boathouse where a symphony of sulphur and other butterflies were busy obtaining nutrients from the sand. This afternoon we split up, with half of the group taking to the river with Jose to see what we could find and the other half visiting a bird hide with Fabio. Everyone came back happy! The former cruised along in the golden afternoon light, coming across a magnificent adult rufescent tiger heron who, after perching just above the water line in plain sight, clearly didn't want to be ignored as we pulled away. It flew in a wide arc right across the front of the boat as if to say, "Look at me, look at me!" We admired it accordingly.



Further upriver came feeding white-nosed saki monkeys, two enormous capybaras snoozing on a beach, a neotropical otter feeding on an exposed rock amongst a series of rapids and a juvenile great black hawk feeding on a fish that appeared bigger than it was on a nearby riverbank. Stabilising it with its impressive talons, it proceeded to drag it into vegetation, most likely to hide it from scavengers. The sound of black-fronted nunbirds, uncannily like car alarms, filled the air and our last calls before nightfall came from channel-billed tucans lifting their necks high as if to amplify the sound. Nightjars galore and a multitude of bats flew around us acrobatically as we arrived home shortly after 18:00.

Half an hour later, Helen joined the rest of the group with Fabio to go through what had been seen in the bird hide. My word, they were buzzing having viewed no less than 15 species and tufted capuchin monkeys to boot! In addition to manakins and an unidentified foliage-gleaner, there was a definite theme going on with antbirds, antwrens, antshrikes, ant-tanager and more in the mix. We brought Fabio a well-deserved beer and by 19:00 were in the conference room with another guide, Bruno, who took us through Cristalino's origins, vision, environmental credentials and conservation initiatives. Well informed, we moved to dinner half an hour later and then retired to bed in preparation for another early start tomorrow.

**Friday 27 June 2025**

### **Day 12: Alta Floresta to Cuiaba**

*Weather: sunny and hot, 31°C*

Once again, the group split up this morning. Those going on foot to a saltlick not far from the lodge left at 05:10, in order to try and maximise their chances of seeing tapir. The early bird catches the worm, and they enjoyed success, looking down on one from their elevated platform and staying on for another two hours or so in the hope of perhaps coming across Brocket deer and/or peccaries. Despite no appearances from the latter, they heard white-whiskered spider monkeys nearby and were able to enjoy the anticipation of

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wondering whether they might come closer. They did!

The rest of us were going to follow a trail to a lookout point 80 metres above the canopy. Departing upriver at 06:00, the morning mist rose from the water, casting a ghostly glow over the verdant landscape. As we pulled in towards the bank from which we would start our walk, a distinctly hippo-like backside revealed itself, and we realised we had a tapir right in front of us! It was in the water and walked away from us, ducking underwater and swimming repeatedly, only to appear a little further on. It hauled itself up onto the bank in an ungainly manner and disappeared. We were having incredible luck with sightings of these wonderful animals.

Our walk took us initially through flooded forest, and then we began to climb through semi-deciduous and finally, deciduous forest. Using ropes to clamber over boulders, it took half an hour to reach an open area where Fabio spotted a turn-tail lizard in a crevasse, a species only discovered last year when it was recorded here for the first time. Looking down from our large granite boulder, flying rivers seemed to evaporate in front of our eyes, and it was truly a gorgeous, clear morning with birdsong all around. There was a sheer drop beneath us, and the wide canopy of a fig tree directly below became the object of our affection due to its fruit attracting a veritable bird bonanza. It started with golden-bellied and rufous-bellied euphonia, and then came a tantalising treat of tanagers, including turquoise, opal-rumped, bay-headed and flame-crested. Featuring a ridiculous rainbow of colours, we also watched blue dacnis, violaceous euphonia, and perhaps the star of the morning, pompadour cotinga. Cristalino is not known as a birding hotspot for nothing!



Time flies when you're having fun and we couldn't believe it when 08:00 came around. We ambled back towards the river where Jose waited for us, stopping to notice a red pine cone type flower, called a sugar cane swamp plant locally. Lower down, we viewed a vine of upright red-looking tulip flowers, gorgeous unopened *Passiflora cristalino*. Once on the river, we stopped briefly for a spectacled caiman, numerous sunbitterns and a swimming anhinga who was living up to its name of 'snakebird'.

Once back at the lodge, we readied ourselves for departure, viewing black-bellied cuckoo, black-whiskered vireo and our last blue morpho as we said our goodbyes to the hospitality team. The resident family of bare-faced curassow saw us off, and we set off down river with Fabio and Jose passing a toad-head terrapin sunning itself en route to the port. There, we met back up with Enzo, who escorted us to Alta Floresta from where we flew, on time, back to Cuiaba.

Instead of transferring straight to our overnight hotel, we stopped at Mao Bonifacio Park in order to search for black-tailed marmosets and stretch our legs. It took a while, but thanks to one client, we watched two individuals as they moved around a fallen tree. We all decided they were a little cuter (the scientific term, obviously) than the marmosets at Trijuncao, with their lovely coffee crème colouring and thicker fur, although they must have been sweltering as we were certainly feeling the humidity as we walked. We also added moustached wren and little woodpecker to our species list, bringing the total so far to 21 mammals and a whopping 205 birds! Dinner at our hotel was in order before we had an early night dictated by our super early flight to Campo Grande tomorrow.

**Saturday 28 June 2025**

### **Day 13: Cuiaba to Bonito**

*Weather: sunny and hot, 29°C*

Leaving our hotel at 03:00, we were dropped off at the airport with plenty of time to grab much-needed coffee and a snack before flying south. It was warm and clear on arrival in Campo Grande and we were transferred directly to Bonito, approximately three and a half hours away.

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We were back in the land of red-legged seriemas and southern crested caracaras, indeed, blue-and-yellow macaws greeted us with a low fly-by. A turkey vulture followed suit, giving us a bird's eye view of its red face, and by mid-morning, we were dropped at the simple and lovely Olho D'Agua, where we had arranged early check in, for a day of well-earned rest.

With no activities planned for the rest of the day, we took full advantage of the lodge's breeze-filled gardens and pool, where toco tucan and agouti meandered around. Meeting up for dinner at 18:30, one client nearly ended up with bolognese instead of a Budweiser due to the language barrier, and after much frivolity, we went through the plan for tomorrow and enjoyed another early night.

**Sunday 29 June 2025**

#### **Day 14: Bonito, via Buraco das Araras, to Caiman Lodge**

*Weather: cloudy with sunny spells, 29°C*

With batteries charged and anticipation high, we were woken up before our alarm by screeching chaco chachalacas. Setting off after breakfast at 07:20 with Azara's capuchin monkeys in the trees and agouti on the lawn, we were met by guide, Diaria, and headed towards South America's largest sinkhole, Buraco das Araras, home to a staggering number of red-and-green macaws. Leaving town, we passed a procession on horseback celebrating a saint's day. In front of a digger bringing up the rear, were men armed with spades picking up copious amounts of horse dung from the road...how organised!



We stopped to photograph yellow-faced parrots by the side of the road and turquoise-fronted Amazons flew over as greater rheas dotted the fields and savanna hawks the fence posts. Upon arrival at the sinkhole, we quickly walked to the first of two viewing platforms, coming across three large and hairy collared peccaries along the way. We could hear the macaws well before we could see them and suddenly we were there. Flying at eye level and below us, their fantastic colours well and truly popped against the sheer red rock cliff walls and dark green vegetation 100 metres below. They landed ridiculously close to us, nibbling on leaves and fruit, looking as though they were hanging on with their

impressive bills. It had rained during the drive but now the sun was breaking through in intervals, illuminating them to perfection, and we watched them squabble for space on branches and for nesting sites on the cliffs. They didn't sit still for long, flying to and fro before us, generating smiles of wonder.

One lone blue-and-yellow macaw flew amongst them, now resident with them, and we learnt that hybrids have occurred. Two black vultures were stationary on a branch, so close you could touch them, and beyond them, movement gave away the presence of squirrel cuckoo, greater keskidee and a lurking roadside hawk. There were relatively few other people here and just as we were about to head to the second platform opposite, it seemed as though every macaw in the vicinity took to the air to wave us off. What an extraordinary spectacle!



We looked for a single caiman trapped at the bottom and heard that a howler monkey, evicted from her troop, can be seen here occasionally, too. We enjoyed an extended stay, watching them all take to the air en masse once more before leaving at 09:40 to drop our guide back in Bonito and then carry on to Caiman Lodge. Our Pantanal experience began in earnest shortly

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after leaving the town of Miranda at 12:00.

Turning onto Caiman's dirt access road, we immediately came across a giant anteater meandering across a field directly in front of us, flanked by horses, two capybara and a swirling mass of black skimmers! We were out of the vehicle in a flash, lined up against the fence as lorries sped past on the main road to our right. We snapped away, capturing this marvellous, yet strange-looking creature on film, and then stood watching it through our binoculars before it disappeared over a ridge heading towards a small dam. Wow. We couldn't believe our ongoing luck.



We got back in the vehicle and hadn't gone five minutes down the road when another appeared. Again, we stopped, disembarked and walked towards the fence. A cattle grid was in front of us and we walked over it, checking that the ant-eater wasn't perturbed by our presence, and with no sign of discomfort, we kept walking towards it. We got to within perhaps 20 metres of it when it started to walk away from us. We stopped and let it go. Our second five out of five sighting in the space of ten minutes. Hoorah! We continued again, coming across yet another one (honest guv!) another five minutes later. This was borderline ridiculous and we were loving it. We didn't get out for this one, but watched it

ascend a small rise and then start to run forward. It was in tall grass and we lost sight of it quickly but for the rest of the trip, we sat up just a little bit straighter as we strained our eyes for whatever might be next.

At 13:10, we entered Refugio Caiman. Driving along an avenue of mature mango trees, a pampas deer sat ruminating by the side of the road and we pulled up right next to it, our sliding side door was opened, and we were able to photograph it from the comfort of our seats. Hyacinth macaws followed next, then yacare caiman, one of which was completely out of the water on the side of the road. As we approached our lodge entrance gate, capybara, wattled jacana and southern screamer were in full view. We were welcomed with a cold refreshing towel and escorted through reception to a large lounge, where we were offered tea and coffee. We swiftly signed our check-in paperwork and were escorted through to a stunning buffet lunch in the restaurant. There we met our naturalist guide, Luisa, who apologised profusely for not being there to welcome us on arrival but she had been detained removing a curucucu, a large, non-venomous snake, from a fence in the vicinity of our accommodation!



Fully satiated, we were shown to our rooms and had a little under two hours to unpack and settle in. By 16:00, we were seated in another lounge where we received an introductory presentation from Luisa on both the Pantanal and the lodge. We learnt how cattle farming and eco-tourism work hand in hand here, and about the conservation initiatives of Oncafari, a hyacinth macaw project and lastly, work with blue-fronted parrots. 40 minutes later, and we were ready to see the reserve for ourselves.

Climbing aboard our open-sided nine-seater safari vehicle, we met our Pantaneiro driver spotter, Juliano, and set off immediately viewing jabiru stork, great egret, Muscovy duck, plumbeous ibis and capybara. We drove over a bridge which has been standing for over 100 years, crossing the lagoon directly in front of the lodge and stopping to view an adult rufescent tiger heron standing proudly amongst the water hyacinth below. Passing a further small body of water, a cattle tyrant perched on the back of a capybara and we passed a series of flamboyant trees, currently devoid of flowers but rocking wonderful, long, black hanging seed pods.

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We passed the staff village where a crab-eating fox loitered below a palm tree full of hyacinth macaws hanging upside down as they fed. We then heard on the radio that a giant anteater with a baby had been spotted. Did we want to go see it? Of course! Ignoring a pampas deer in our haste, at the end of the air strip, we found them. We dismounted to get closer on foot, staying downwind and keeping noise to a bare minimum, as we watched in awe as the infant clung to its mother's back. It was a beautiful sight. The baby, who was estimated to be around three months old, was simply adorable and Mum fed on, totally oblivious to us.

We drove on as dusk fell, coming across two more crab-eating foxes. While one disappeared into thick vegetation, the other was very relaxed in our spotlight, eating something behind a bone lying in the grass. We crossed into a field full of cattle, getting well and truly stuck in a 'cow jam' at one point. Juliano was born and bred here, though, so skillfully manoeuvred us through them until we reached a jabiru stork nest with the soon-to-be parents both present on the top. The nesting holes of monk parakeets, who share their home, could clearly be seen beneath the large straw structure.

Leaving pastureland behind us, we moved into a protected part of the reserve and the difference in vegetation was immediately obvious. Thick, lush palm trees provided a dense, jungle environment through which we drove super slowly, searching for eye shine. At the end of the road, numerous pairs of bright red eyes were clearly reflected, indicating that we had caiman ahead. We scanned the area carefully, knowing that an ocelot has its territory here, but with no feline features in sight, we found a black-crowned night heron instead. We drove on to a waterhole that we were advised tends to be quite reliable for tapir, but tonight, all was quiet, so we did a U-turn, arriving back at the lodge not long thereafter. Dinner was served from 19:30 and it was pizza night. A variety of other options were also available, including a dessert table, which made us all very happy. A coffee or two later, and we headed to bed dreaming of adventures yet to come.

**Monday 30 June 2025**

### **Day 15: On safari**

*Weather: overcast, chilly and windy, 17°C*

I have one word for this morning and one word only. PUMA! It was our guide's first one ever and our driver spotter's second, despite having lived here his entire life. That put the sighting well and truly into perspective for us.

Our day began with a bush breakfast served in the stables. The horses were let out just before our arrival and we watched a whistling heron, a leucistic Picazuro pigeon, a variety of other birds and a jabiru stork feeding on a large fish as they ambled by. We tucked into traditional fare, eggs, fruit and coffee, and afterwards, decided to skip a presentation on the life of a Pantaneiro, as our focus was most definitely on finding wildlife. We set off, Juliano spotting an agouti deep in the undergrowth and a grey (brown) brocket deer on the side of a track. We then spotted the puma. Calmly walking ahead of us in the road, it took a second or two to register what we were looking at. It was definitely feline, but as we were expecting the stocky build and rosetted coat of its larger cousin, we were a little disbelieving at first. It stopped as we did, turning its head to look over its shoulder, and it stared at us as we stared back. He was a male and he was magnificent.



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He was calm and relaxed, and after perhaps ten or fifteen precious seconds, he trotted off around a bend in the road and disappeared from sight. The adrenaline hit was immediate! We exhaled, high-fived, hugged, grinned, and Luisa held back tears as we checked our photos to ensure he had not been an apparition! Oh, he was real alright. We took a while to absorb what we'd seen and then drove on slowly, not really expecting to find him again, but we had nothing to lose. He had unsurprisingly vanished, but we stopped at a small water hole just in case he might re-appear, and watched numerous rufescent tiger herons standing like statues and vocalising their low cow-like call.



Carrying on to the next waterhole, still very much trying to assimilate our incredible fortune, we added roseate spoonbill, Brazilian teal and bare-faced ibis to our bird list. Passing a yellow ipe (trumpet flower tree), we could clearly see that the trunk has been repeatedly used as a clawing post by jaguars, and we fervently hoped to see them next. Blaze-winged parakeets flew past, and we followed them before stopping for purplish jays and a vermilion flycatcher. We'd been driving through dense jungle that had repeatedly opened up into wide marshes that would dry out later in the season, but now

approached pastureland filled with cows, greater rhea, pampas deer and more. A stationary snail kite came into view atop a fence post, then a toucan was seen eating from a papaya tree, its bill the exact same colour as the fruit.

Five hyacinth macaws perched on five fence posts in a row and then another raptor made the list, a crane hawk. A babybara (young capybara) had us out of the vehicle and at ground level trying to photograph its endearing face and when we finally got home at around 10:30, we gathered in the lounge for celebratory hot chocolate. I know I've said it before, but the wildlife gods pulled it out of the bag for us again today!



Later, after lunch and downtime, we were wrapped up warm, ready for departure, when a flock of monk parakeets saw us off at 15:30. Coming out of the lodge, a pair of hyacinth macaws were on the ground in the road drinking from a puddle, and they waddled away in an endearingly awkward manner at our approach. We drove towards what we were calling 'Ocelot Bridge', where snowy and great egrets shared space with three capybaras on an exposed island. Turning to look over the lagoon to the left, Lucia noticed a pale-crested woodpecker tapping away on a quest for food. A roadside hawk lived up to its name, walking next to us before flying into a tree as we continued with our drive, accompanied by the familiar sound of chopi blackbirds.

We turned off the main road to search an area only just unlocked from its watery state over the last few months, coming across gorgeous golden-collared macaws as we did so. Right next to us in a tree, and below a juvenile snail kite, we watched them as they went on their way, and we followed suit. We checked an area renowned for tapir, seeing a trail made by them through dense vegetation, smelled the vanilla perfume of a lovely and prolific pink flower, and then heard on the radio that a vehicle had come across a jaguar. We immediately did a six-point turn (the raised road was narrow) and retraced our steps, only to learn that it had vanished into the bush.

Many vehicles had tried to see it, but they had all now moved off, so we decided to try our luck. We pulled up next to an area of higher ground, where soil had been laid on top of a series of concrete pipes. A new initiative, these pipes are appearing all over the area after it was noted that wildlife used them to escape last year's dreadful and deadly fires. The raised earth covering them is being favoured as a vantage point by

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jaguars now, but the new, thick surrounding grasses had well and truly swallowed up the individual that we were after this time.

Undeterred, we carried on, chuckling as a greater rhea did a hop, skip, and a jump off the road, landing with a splash in a puddle to get out of our way. Night fell, and we continued our search by spotlight. It was cold and the wind was picking up so after one final look back at Ocelot Bridge, where a small crab-eating fox ran ahead of us on the road, we returned home at 18:45 to freshen up and warm up, before dinner. For today, it seemed our big cat quota had been used up on puma (hoorah), but tomorrow we would start afresh.

**Tuesday 1 July 2025**

### **Day 16: On safari**

*Weather: light cloud with sunny spells, 18°C*



The day dawned full of promise. There was little wind, we welcomed the return of the sun rising over the easterly horizon and there were clear breaks in the cloud cover above. A male and female pair of bare-faced curassows danced down the road ahead of us, and a crab-eating fox appeared small, dark and looking damp in a field of lush, green grass. We disturbed a flock of black-hooded parakeets and they flew up in unison before settling once again. A campo flicker fed amongst them and we came across our first white monjita in a branch above.

We passed the staff village, noticing a six-banded armadillo scurrying through the garden there as pampas deer grazed on the football field. Our destination was a field full of cows just beyond, as three jaguars had been seen there recently: a mating pair and an intruding female who had caused quite a ruckus with her arrival. We noticed fresh tracks in the road and as we were on high ground, we took the opportunity to off-road, circling hummocks and checking under every palm, thicket and tree for resting felines. It felt like we were close, very close. We silently scanned, passing black vultures on an old kill and numerous piles of bones, remnants of even older kills. A pair of common piping guans flew into a tree ahead and we turned our attention back to ground level.

Deciding to try our luck elsewhere, we re-passed the staff village by which time the air was thick with the swirls of grey-breasted and brown-chested martins circling. Crossing the bridge by the lodge, we stopped to observe ringed kingfishers at rest and three capybaras swimming in formation towards us. They passed beneath us, popping up the other side and swimming into dense water hyacinth. With nowhere to go, they swam back to us and we photographed them with joy.

At 07:45, we heard on the radio that a jaguar had been seen half an hour away. We didn't hesitate but asked to head in its direction immediately. Holding on, Juliano drove with suitable speed and care towards the sighting, driving us off-road and into pastureland filled with cows and pampas deer. Here, the fun began! The further we drove, the boggier the land became. The result of late unseasonal rain, we negotiated our way around hummocks, but at one point, we became well and truly stuck. Juliano jumped out and gathered branches, placing them under the tyres whilst Luisa drove forward and back, trying to get a grip. Our vehicle was heavy (nothing to do with the excellent food provided on this trip, I'm sure!), but we eventually made it. We could see an Oncafari vehicle perhaps 500 metres to our left, so we knew we were close. At least it was stationary.

Trying to turn around, we got stuck again. This time, Juliano unwound a cable from the front of the vehicle, used a tie to reach a nearby tree, and then electronically winched us out. What a neat piece of kit! At 09:00 exactly, we proceeded towards the sighting where we were directed in due to an abundance of yet more mud, and as we caught sight of not one, but two jaguars sitting calmly directly ahead of us, our wheels slowly

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sank deeper and deeper into the quagmire. We could go no further; we were stuck again!

We were as happy as Larry, though, as we finally had our first sighting of impressive and stunningly beautiful big cats. After a few minutes, we were winched out by a departing vehicle (thank you!) and then spent the next 20 minutes or so on more solid ground, watching what turned out to be three magnificent felines! We could clearly see a large, collared individual and a smaller jaguar next to her. We learnt that they were a seven-year-old mother and her eleven-month-old cub. A huge number of black vultures were feeding on a kill behind them, and they were resting off their meal.



Then everything changed. We could see another jaguar, a female, obscured by vegetation to our left. The collared female got up and started walking towards her. She moved slowly and deliberately, clearly stalking it, never taking her eyes off it. She appeared to be warning it to stay away. She stood, poised to pounce, front left paw in the air, and then purposefully lowered her body to the ground. She stared intently at what we now knew was a five-year-old female, as her cub came to join her, greeting her with a head rub, lying down next to her and joining in with the stare off.

The mother moved off, scent marking a tree as she went, before slumping down onto the track a little further ahead and almost out of sight. The cub got up and copied its Mum, urinated in the same spot, rubbing its face on the tree and then disappearing around the corner too. At this stage, the lone female got up, moved slightly further away from us and started to tug at what we realised was her kill. She had a cow partially hidden behind her and we watched as she proceeded to eat, just the outline of her back now visible. As remaining vehicles began to depart, we thought it best to put head over heart and go with them in case we got stuck once more. We were on a wildlife high once again and chatted happily as we returned home for a full breakfast, passing roseate spoonbill and gorgeous whistling heron in the grass, yacare caiman-filled waterways (now that the sun had reappeared), and a jabiru stork sitting down, its knees bending in the opposite direction to ours.

We relaxed away the next few hours before setting off again, raring to go at 15:30. We dismounted just outside the lodge gates to photograph thermoregulating caiman from ground level. The line of caranda palms behind them shone in the welcome sunlight, and as an Oncafari vehicle parked up close by, we all had a laugh when one client said, "Follow them!" An agouti shot across the road as we entered a truly beautiful area, the red road ahead cutting a line through dense, palm lined vegetation. Helen asked to stop and photograph another fire break construction, complete with more concrete pipes to harbour fleeing wildlife, and we shot off afterwards as a pale figure could clearly be seen on the side of the road.



It turned out to be a remarkably relaxed grey (brown) brocket deer. We watched it in the dappled light as it daintily nibbled at vegetation. We had just moved off when Luisa announced that a jaguar had been found

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at the fire break we'd just stopped at. What are the chances? She didn't have to ask. We did a 180-degree turn and arrived to find a huge male lying right next to the road. He'd probably been there all along, but we'd looked out, rather than down. We couldn't believe it and sat there grinning like Cheshire cats!

He was lying in a patch of vivid green grass when we arrived. He yawned, got up, and quite frankly, sauntered down the road ahead

of us, defecated and then scent-marked his route. He was in no hurry, the king of his domain, and we gave him space before following slowly behind. He turned off into tall, lush, lime green vegetation and flopped down unceremoniously. We discovered that his name is Formoso, meaning 'charming' and that he is five years old, absolutely in his prime.



Two more vehicles joined us, and we suspected more would be coming, so it was a case of great timing as we heard that a female had been spotted around 15 minutes away. Again, we didn't hesitate but went off to find her. Helen jokingly waved her arm at a greater rhea, gesturing for it to move out of the way, and the poor panicked bird did just that. Flapping its wings, it zigzagged away at great speed. We shouldn't have laughed, but I'm afraid we did, until we cried in some cases!

Helen jokingly waved her arm at a greater rhea, gesturing for it to move out of the way, and the poor panicked bird did just that. Flapping its wings, it zigzagged away at great speed. We shouldn't have laughed, but I'm afraid we did, until we cried in some cases!



We got to the female, a two and a half year old called Itapira, in time to watch her walk across a raised bank and disappear into thick vegetation. We decided to wait for her, and eagle-eyed Luisa relocated her shortly afterwards. She was about a foot into a dense thicket, walking towards a small lagoon. We moved ahead and waited for her. Sure enough, she appeared, stood overlooking the water and then entered it slowly, in full hunting mode. Stalking, she positioned each foot step with precision and stealth as we noticed two capybara sitting stock still on a bank very close by. She went behind the bank and we lost visual, but a rufescent tiger heron seemed to be watching the jaguar's every move,

so we assumed she was still close.

We waited for her on tenterhooks, and we all jumped when suddenly the capybara alarm sounded and took to the water with a splash. Everything went quiet. After a while, we could hear branches snapping, betraying the jaguar's movement, and she reappeared. She walked along the water's edge, stepped into it once more and we could hear her as she approached the road directly ahead. Stopping to look back at us, she crossed over and slid under a wooden gate to our left, and we watched her walk off into the sunset. We'd experienced a whirlwind of emotion this afternoon, from elation, excitement, anticipation, and finally a sense of deep, deep calm. All was right in the world.

Taking a moment to compose ourselves, we had just set off again when Luisa spotted a purple gallinule. A truly stunning bird of peacock blues, greens and purples, we photographed it and started to make our way back towards our male jaguar from earlier, but received an update that he'd walked off into the bush.

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As such, we checked 'Ocelot Bridge', did a loop around the area, came across a Brazilian rabbit, and when nearing the bridge once again, a form was spotted on the side of the road. At first, we thought it was crab-eating fox, but it materialised right next to our vehicle, complete with a distinctive coat, and we realised we had our ocelot. No way! It moved nimbly but not too quickly as we followed it with our spotlight as it ventured out of sight into thick undergrowth. It had been brief, but not too brief, and it had been stunning. Thankful was not the word.

After a simply fantastic day, we were dropped off at the stables for dinner, where a feast had been prepared along with music and cosy seating around fire pits. It was lovely to welcome back the stars, and we retired to bed under clear skies, wondering how on earth tomorrow could top anything so far.

**Wednesday 2 July 2025**

### **Day 17: On safari**

*Weather: sunny, 22°C*

This morning started with a bang as we came across a jaguarundi on the road less than five minutes from the lodge. This really was becoming ridiculous, but quite marvellously so. It had dawned clear and bright, and the Jurassic Park-type landscape in which we found ourselves lent a suitable backdrop to this small, agile and rarely seen jet black cat. It stopped to look back at us briefly before trotting down the road and veering off into the ether. We managed to get a few photos, blurred admittedly, but we were elated. Even Luisa commented on our fantastic fortune with rare mammals, especially.

We drove the road on which we'd seen the puma 48 hours ago, not for one moment believing that lightning would strike twice, but it twisted and turned through large bodies of water, and we were hopeful for marsh deer. Although they were not obliging and remained out of our sight, we sat back and enjoyed the sunlight setting off our surroundings to perfection. We pulled up at a picturesque lake, the reflections ridiculously beautiful, and watched an Amazon kingfisher negotiate its way through its catch. A large fish in its bill was being, for want of a better word, battered repeatedly against the branch the avian predator was sitting on. We pulled in closer and watched through our binoculars as it was finally able to swallow its huge meal that we had no doubt was filling its entire stomach, and then some! Dry capybaras, their coats a rich, chocolate brown, sat overlooking the water, while vermilion flycatchers were numerous and we were treated to a fly by from three deep pink roseate spoonbills.



We drove on, passing an On Safari vehicle who advised that they had a signal for a collared female jaguar, known to have a cub, but that she was moving, most likely due to spoor for a large male also being prevalent in the area. We decided to drive around the block of land she was in, hoping she (or they) might appear at some point. We disturbed a large flock of ruddy ground doves, and we watched a southern crested caracara whizz by almost at eye level with nesting material in its mouth, but there was no sign of any cat action. Another large flock flew next to us, this time of peach-fronted parakeets, and then we stopped to view a giant egret also fishing, successfully, we might add. A new species was spotted, the orange-backed troupial, its vivid and bright plumage just glorious.

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Closer to home, Luisa spotted a lone capuchin monkey feeding on palm nuts, and we stopped to enjoy its antics through the greenery. We hoped more might appear and one did, so we spent a few minutes there, but it looked as if these few individuals were bringing up the rear of the troop. It had been a quieter drive after the initial excitement of the jaguarundi, but it had been a lovely one. The sun continued to shine brightly so we relaxed by the pool or in sheltered, wooden Adirondack chairs back at the lodge, and warmed up with coffee as the air was still chilly.

A snooze later and some packing in readiness for departure tomorrow, and we were looking forward to one last safari.

Passing the stables at 15:30, capybara and pampas deer basked in the sun, and as we entered the cool, calm sanctuary of the palm-fringed forest, agoutis ran across the road repeatedly. We were looking for signs of the big male jaguar, Formoso, that we'd seen here yesterday.

We ended up at one of the two smaller lodges that can be booked out in their entirety here, where a row of lesser yellow-headed and turkey vultures sat on fence posts all in a row. Hyacinth macaws were with them, on the ground though, and whistling herons moved comedically, pulling their necks back as if to gain momentum in order to walk forward. We stopped to allow a golden-collared macaw on the road to fly off and it landed next to us, where two other individuals showed off their stunning colours.

With no sign of cat activity, we headed further into the reserve, and at a T junction, out of nowhere came a procession of white-lipped peccaries crossing the road in a leisurely manner ahead of us. We took in their markings and watched them move unhurriedly, and Luisa asked if we could smell them. At that point, our answer was no, but that soon changed. They produce a hormone that enables the group to stay together and to say it was musky, musty and ripe was an understatement!



A grey (brown) brocket deer came next and at 17:20, we heard that the female jaguar with cub that Oncafari had had a signal for this morning, had just been seen. We were advised that she was half an hour or so away, and moving in and out of sight, but we had nothing to lose by trying for them. We drove into the sunset, curls of pink swirling clouds above us looking very much like candy floss. At dusk, we arrived at the scene, moved off road, and suddenly the cub was standing underneath a palm right in front of us. We were metres from it. It moved, so we drove on, finding Mum, Kwara, bringing up the rear as the cub, Laura, walked ahead of her. Oncafari had been tracking them for some time and had quite a few vehicles at the scene, so we headed back towards the road in the hope that they might cross. The wet ground beneath us, however, had other ideas and once again, we became stuck in mud, glorious mud. Another adventure to bring out at dinner parties in the future! We were towed out and carried on with our drive, the jaguars long gone.

We knew dinner was in the bush tonight, but we didn't know where it would be, or anything more than that, so we enjoyed a night drive, passing a multitude of nightjars en route to our mystery destination. We watched a great potoo, an extension of the tree trunk it was perched upon, gazing surreptitiously into the darkness above a lagoon that perfectly reflected the Milky Way. Shortly before 19:00, we could see a mass of lights coming into view. We pulled up and walked into a lantern and candle-filled wonderland where, strewn across massive buttressed trunks and roots of trees, were baskets filled with light. Beneath low branches were sheepskin-covered rocking chairs set up around fire pits, and we were welcomed with mulled cachaca into this utterly gorgeous setting! We built our burgers and ate salad and dessert under the

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stars, soaking up this fitting end to a truly wonderful trip.

**Thursday 3 July 2025**

**Day 18: Campo Grande to London**

*Weather: overcast, 12°C*

An early start ensured that we left under a cloak of darkness at 05:00, and were given a last farewell from Refugio Caiman by crab-eating fox and another ocelot. The dirt road back to Miranda took one hour and 15 minutes, after which we passed capybara, red-legged seriema, and more on the drive back to Campo Grande. We flew to São Paulo, where we had use of day rooms at the very comfortable Pullman Airport Hotel. We enjoyed a huge lunch and, after a restful afternoon, re-grouped in the lobby, ready to head back to the airport at 20:30 in time for our nonstop overnight flight home.

**Friday 4 July 2025**

**Day 19: Arrive in the UK**

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# Checklist for Best of Brazil



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15	Day 16	Day 17	Day 18
	<b>MAMMALS</b>																		
1	Black-tufted marmoset	<i>Callithrix penicillata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓											
2	Giant ant-eater	<i>Myrmecophaga tridactyla</i>		✓			✓								✓				
3	Maned wolf	<i>Chrysocron brachyurus</i>		✓		✓	✓												
4	Brazilian guineapig	<i>Cavia aperea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓												
5	Crab eating fox	<i>Cerdocyon thousand</i>			✓	✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Pampas deer	<i>Ozotoceros bezoarticus</i>			✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Six-banded armadillo	<i>Euphractus sexcinctus</i>			✓		✓	✓									✓		
8	Hog-nosed skunk	<i>Conepatus chinga</i>				✓													
9	Seven-banded armadillo	<i>Dasypus septemcinctus</i>				✓	✓												
10	South American tapir	<i>Tapirus terrestris</i>					✓			✓			✓						
11	Neotropical otter	<i>Lontra longicaudis</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓							
12	Tufted capuchin monkey	<i>Sapajus apella</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓							
13	Capybara	<i>Hydrochaeris hydrochaeris</i>							✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	White-nosed saki monkey	<i>Pithecia pithecia</i>								✓		✓							
15	Lesser sac-winged bat	<i>Saccopteryx leptura</i>								✓									
16	Long-nosed bat	<i>Rhynchonycteris naso</i>								✓									
17	Guianan squirrel	<i>Sciurus ingrami</i>								✓									
18	Azara's agouti	<i>Dasyprocta azarae</i>								✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	White-whiskered spider monkey	<i>Ateles marginatus</i>										✓	✓						
20	White-lipped peccary	<i>Tayassu pecari</i>										✓						✓	
21	Black-tailed marmoset	<i>Micro melanurus</i>											✓						
22	Azara's capuchin													✓	✓			✓	
23	Collared peccary	<i>Tayassu tajacu</i>													✓				
24	Grey (brown) brocket deer	<i>Mazama gouazoubira</i>														✓	✓	✓	
25	Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>														✓			

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26	Jaguar	<i>Panthera onca</i>																✓	
27	Brazilian rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus brasiliensis</i>																✓	
28	Ocelot	<i>Leopardus pardalis</i>																✓	✓
29	Jaguarundi	<i>Herpailurus yagouaroundi</i>																	✓
	<b>BIRDS</b>																		
1	Black vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
2	Blue-and-yellow macaw	<i>Ara ararauna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				
3	Chalk-browed mockingbird	<i>Mimus saturninus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓						✓
4	Swallow-tailed hummingbird	<i>Eupetomena macroura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓											
5	Greater keskidee	<i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	✓		✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Rufous hornero	<i>Furnarius rufus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Southern lapwing	<i>Vanellus chilensis</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Yellow-chevroned parakeet	<i>Brotogeris chiriri</i>	✓																
9	Rufous-bellied thrush	<i>Turdus rufiventris</i>	✓															✓	
10	Rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓																
11	Squirrel cuckoo	<i>Piaya cayana</i>		✓											✓				
12	Tropical kingbird	<i>Tyrannus melancholius</i>		✓		✓			✓	✓			✓						
13	Laughing falcon	<i>Herpetotheres cachinnans</i>		✓									✓						
14	Toco toucan	<i>Ramphastos toco</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Snowy egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Picazuro pigeon	<i>Patagioenas picazuro</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓				
17	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>		✓		✓		✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓					
19	Southern crested caracara	<i>Caracara planus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Burrowing owl	<i>Athene cucularia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										
21	Buff-necked ibis	<i>Theristicus caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Roadside hawk	<i>Rupornis magnirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Greater rhea	<i>Rhea americana</i>		✓	✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Ruddy ground dove	<i>Columbina talpacoti</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓			✓	
25	Guira cuckoo	<i>Guira guira</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Red-legged seriema	<i>Cariama cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Bare-faced currasow	<i>Crax fasciolata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
28	Scaled dove	<i>Columbina squammata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓									✓		
29	Palm tanager	<i>Thraupis palmarum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓							

30	Chopi blackbird	<i>Gnorimopsar Chopi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓		✓	✓	
31	Sayaca tanager	<i>Thraupis sayaca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓												
32	Pale-vented pigeon	<i>Patagioenas cayennensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓											
33	Peach-fronted parakeet	<i>Aratinga aurea</i>			✓	✓		✓						✓		✓		✓	
34	Aplomado falcon	<i>Falco femoralis</i>			✓	✓		✓											
35	White-rumped monjita	<i>Xolmis velatus</i>			✓	✓	✓							✓		✓	✓		
36	Curl-crested jay	<i>Cyanocorax cristatellus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
37	Blue-fronted parrot /turquoise-fronted Amazon	<i>Amazonia aestivation</i>			✓	✓		✓							✓	✓	✓		
38	White-tailed hawk	<i>Buteo al I caudatus</i>			✓														
39	Saffron finch	<i>Sicalis flaveola</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓	
40	Rufous-fronted thornbird	<i>Phacellodomus rufifrons</i>			✓														
41	Coal-crested finch	<i>Charitospiza eucosma</i>			✓														
42	Black-throated saltator	<i>Saltator atricollis</i>			✓	✓		✓											
43	Grassland sparrow	<i>Ammodramus humeralis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
44	White-rumped tanager	<i>Cypsnagra hirundinacea</i>			✓														
45	Cinnamon tanager	<i>Schistochlamys ruficapillus</i>			✓	✓	✓												
46	Forktailed palm-swift/Neotropical palm swift	<i>Tachornis squamata</i>			✓	✓													
47	Collared crescentchest	<i>Melanopareia torquata</i>			✓			✓											
48	Red-shouldered macaw	<i>Diopsittaca nobilis</i>			✓		✓	✓											
49	Lesser yellow-headed vulture	<i>Catharses burrovianus</i>			✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Red-bellied macaw	<i>Orthopsittaca manilata</i>			✓	✓													
51	Red-and-green macaw	<i>Ara chloropterus</i>			✓				✓		✓	✓	✓		✓				
52	White-tipped dove	<i>Leptotila verreauxi</i>			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
53	White woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes candidus</i>			✓	✓	✓									✓			
54	Rufous-collared sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
55	Grey monjita	<i>Xolmis cinereus</i>			✓	✓													
56	Shrike-like tanager	<i>Neothraupis fasciata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
57	Picui ground dove	<i>Columbina picui</i>			✓														
58	Cattle tyrant	<i>Machetornis rixosa</i>			✓										✓		✓	✓	
59	Vermillion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>			✓	✓										✓		✓	
60	Southern rough-winged swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx ruficollis</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
61	White-eared puffbird	<i>Nystalus chacuru</i>			✓														
62	(Lowland) hepatic tanager	<i>Piranga flags</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
63	Campo flicker	<i>Colaptes campestris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓								✓	✓		

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64	Yellow-faced parrot	<i>Alipiopsitta xanthops</i>			✓									✓				
65	Plumbeous seedeater	<i>Sporophila plumber</i>			✓	✓	✓											
66	Common pauraque	<i>Nyctidromus albicollis</i>			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
67	Scissor-tailed nightjar	<i>Hydropsalis torquata</i>			✓	✓	✓											
68	Common potoo	<i>Nyctibius griseus</i>			✓	✓									✓			
69	Masked gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila dumicola</i>				✓												
70	Burnished-buff tanager	<i>Tangara cayana</i>				✓	✓											
71	Common tody-flycatcher	<i>Todirostrum cinereum</i>				✓												
72	Glittering-bellied emerald	<i>Chlorostilbon aureoventris</i>				✓	✓	✓										
73	Blue-crowned parakeet	<i>Aratinga acuticaudata</i>				✓	✓	✓							✓			
74	Wattled jacana	<i>Jacana jacana</i>				✓		✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Lesser seedfinch	<i>Oryzoborus angolensis</i>				✓												
76	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓		✓							✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Southern scrub flycatcher	<i>Sublegatus modestus</i>				✓												
78	White-winged swallow	<i>Tachycineta albiventer</i>				✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
79	Plain-crested elaenia	<i>Elaenia cristata</i>				✓												
80	Red-winged tinamou	<i>Rhynchotus rufescens</i>				✓		✓										
81	Yellow-headed caracara	<i>Milvago chimachima</i>				✓												
82	Checkered woodpecker	<i>Veniliornis mixtus</i>				✓												
83	Narrow-billed woodcreeper	<i>Lepidocolaptes angustirostris</i>				✓											✓	
84	Rufous-tailed jacamar	<i>Galbula ruficauda</i>				✓		✓										
85	American kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>				✓												
86	Chotoy spinetail	<i>Schoeniophylax phryganophilus</i>				✓												
87	Chapada flycatcher	<i>Suiriri islerorum</i>				✓												
88	Silver-beaked tanager	<i>Ramphocelus carbo</i>				✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
89	Pale-breasted thrush	<i>Turdus leucomelas</i>				✓	✓											
90	Rusty-margined guan	<i>Penelope superciliaris</i>				✓		✓						✓				
91	Tropical screech owl	<i>Megascops choliba</i>				✓		✓										
92	Small-billed tinamou	<i>Crypturellus parvirostris</i>					✓	✓										
93	Boat-billed flycatcher	<i>Megarynchus pitangua</i>					✓	✓										
94	Muscovy duck	<i>Cairina moschata</i>					✓	✓			✓			✓	✓			
95	Greater thornbird	<i>Phacellodomus ruber</i>					✓											
96	Pied-billed grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>					✓											
97	Southern beardless-tyrannulet	<i>Camptostoma obsoletum</i>					✓											

98	Horned sungem	<i>Heliactin bilopha</i>						✓											
99	White-vented violetear	<i>Colibri serrirostris</i>						✓											
100	Pale-breasted spinetail	<i>Synallaxis albescens</i>						✓											
101	Blue-black grassquit	<i>Volatinia jacarina</i>						✓											
102	Lineated woodpecker	<i>Dry octopus lineatus</i>						✓											
103	Glittering throated emerald	<i>Amazilia fimbriata</i>						✓											
104	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>						✓											
105	Green ibis	<i>Mesembrinibis cayennensis</i>							✓	✓	✓							✓	
106	Scarlet macaw	<i>Ara macao</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
107	White-banded swallow	<i>Atticora fasciata</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
108	Green kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle americana</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓							
109	Ringed kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle torquata</i>							✓		✓		✓				✓	✓	✓
110	White-bellied parrot	<i>Pionites leucogaster</i>							✓										
111	Swallow-winged puffbird	<i>Chelidoptera tenebrosa</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
112	Chestnut-fronted macaw	<i>Ara Severus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓							
113	Striated heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
114	Sunbittern	<i>Eurypyga helias</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
115	Blue-headed parrot	<i>Pionus menstus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
116	Drab water-tyrant	<i>Ochthornis littoralis</i>							✓										
117	Amazon kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle amazona</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓
118	Rufescent tiger heron	<i>Tigrisoma lineatum</i>							✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Capped heron	<i>Pilherodius pileatus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓							
120	Black-fronted nunbird	<i>Monasa nigrifrons</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
121	Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>							✓		✓	✓	✓				✓		✓
122	Boat-billed heron	<i>Cochlearius cochlearius</i>							✓			✓							
123	Ladder-tailed nightjar	<i>Hydropsalis climacocerca</i>							✓		✓								
124	Madeira parakeet	<i>Pyrrhura snethlageae</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓						
125	Red-throated piping guan	<i>Aburria kujubi</i>								✓	✓	✓							
126	Large-billed tern	<i>Phaetusa simplex</i>								✓									
127	Olive oropendola	<i>Psarocolius bifasciatus</i>									✓							✓	
128	Plumbeous pigeon	<i>Patagioenas plumbea</i>									✓		✓						
129	Great black hawk	<i>Buteogallus urubitinga</i>								✓	✓	✓							
130	Greater yellow-headed vulture	<i>Cathartes melambrotus</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓						
131	King vulture	<i>Sarcoramphus papa</i>								✓	✓								
132	Blue-grey tanager	<i>Thraupis episcopus</i>								✓	✓		✓						

133	Red-capped cardinal	<i>Poroaria gularis</i>								✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
134	Dusky-billed parrotlets	<i>Forpus modestus</i>								✓									
135	Black-throated mango	<i>Anthracothorax nigricollis</i>								✓									
136	Paradise jacamar	<i>Galbula dea</i>								✓	✓		✓						
137	Red-necked aracari	<i>Pteroglossus bitorquatus</i>								✓			✓						
138	Spangled cotinga	<i>Cotinga cayana</i>								✓	✓	✓							
139	Rufous-throated sapphire	<i>Hylocharis sapphirina</i>								✓									
140	Mealy parrot	<i>Amazona farinosa</i>								✓		✓							
141	Piratic flycatcher	<i>Legatus leucophaeus</i>								✓			✓						
142	White-throated tucan	<i>Ramphastos tucans</i>								✓		✓							
143	White-eyed parakeet	<i>Aratinga leucophthalma</i>								✓		✓	✓						
144	Spix's guan	<i>Penelope jacquacu</i>								✓	✓								
145	Chestnut-eared aracari	<i>Pteroglossus castanotis</i>									✓								
146	Curl-crested aracari	<i>Pteroglossus beauharnaesii</i>									✓								
147	Crested oropendola	<i>Psarocolius decumanus</i>									✓								
148	Grey-breasted martin	<i>Progne chalybea</i>									✓							✓	
149	Wood stork	<i>Mycteria americana</i>									✓								
150	Grey-necked wood-rail	<i>Aramedis cajanea</i>									✓					✓		✓	
151	Amazonian umbrellabird	<i>Cephalopterus ornatus</i>									✓								
152	Swallow tanager	<i>Tersina viridis</i>									✓								
153	Yellow-crowned parrot	<i>Amazona ochrocephala</i>									✓								
154	Masked tanager	<i>Tangara nigrocincta</i>									✓		✓						
155	Blackish nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus nigrescens</i>									✓								
156	Gray hawk	<i>Buteo nitidus</i>									✓								
157	Bare-necked fruit-crow	<i>Gymnoderus foetidus</i>									✓								
158	Golden-winged parakeet	<i>Brotogeris chrysoptera</i>									✓		✓						
159	Green-and-rufous kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle inda</i>									✓								
160	Yellow-billed tern	<i>Sternula superciliaris</i>									✓		✓						
161	Black skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>									✓				✓				
162	Pied lapwing	<i>Vanellus cayanus</i>									✓								
163	Channel-billed tucan	<i>Ramphastos vitellinus</i>										✓							
164	Paradise tanager	<i>Tangara chilensis</i>										✓							
165	Double-toothed kite	<i>Harpagus bidentatus</i>										✓							
166	Red-legged honeycreeper	<i>Cyanerpes cyaneus</i>										✓							
167	Green oropendula	<i>Psarocolius viridis</i>										✓	✓						

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237	Common piping guan	<i>Pipile pipile</i>																✓	✓	
238	Blue-winged macaw	<i>Primolius maracana</i>																✓		
239	Purple gallinule	<i>Porphyryla martinica</i>															✓			
240	Orange-backed troupial	<i>Icterus croconotus</i>																✓		
241	Great potoo	<i>Nyctibius grandis</i>																✓		
242	House wren	<i>Troglodytes musculus</i>																	✓	
243	Neotropic cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>																	✓	
244	Common gallinule	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>																	✓	