

Tour Report

Brazil's Big Five Photo Safari

19 October - 1 November 2023

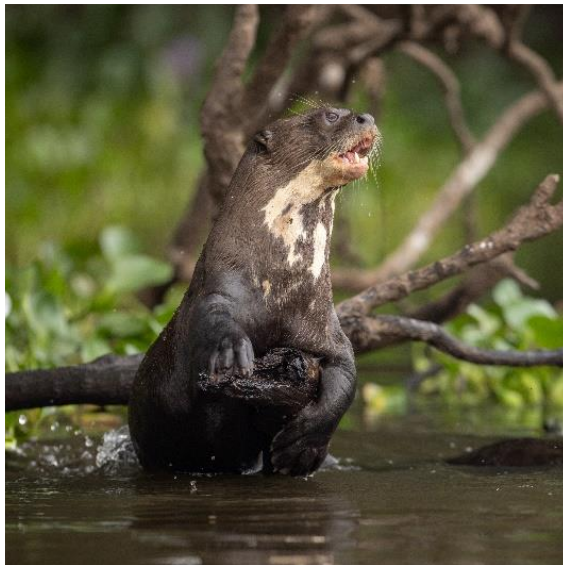
Giant anteater



Jaguar



Giant river otter



Hyacinth macaw



Compiled by Emma Healey

An in-depth tour of the northern Pantanal plus highlights of the Southern Pantanal, in search of Brazil's 'Big Five' – jaguar, giant river otter, hyacinth macaw, Brazilian tapir and giant anteater.

Day 1/2: Travel and transfer to Southwild Pantanal

Thursday 19 - Friday 20 October 2023

The group met up in São Paulo and continued together to Cuiabá, where we were met by Tom and shown to our minibus. Walking out of the airport, we were hit with the hot October temperatures so we were glad to get into our bus and start the journey with the aircon going!

We drove for around 1.5 hours to Poconé, where we stopped for lunch. It was everyone's first experience of a churrascaria, a traditional Brazilian restaurant consisting of a buffet plus endless offers of grilled meat on skewers - just what everyone needed to get them ready for an afternoon drive down the Transpantaneira. After a quick change of clothes and putting together of cameras, we were off. We drove to the gate in our minibus then changed to an open vehicle to give us the opportunity of better sightings and photography.

Driving down the road, it was clear to see that it was a lot drier than this time last year. There has been very little rain and the lagoons and roadside streams were very dry. The road is 147 kilometres long and has 122 bridges. Whereas all of these were previously wooden, they are now being replaced with concrete alternatives, which makes driving quicker and safer. As we reached the first couple of bridges, we stopped to watch the varied bird species that were enjoying the shallow waters, including buff-necked, plumbeous and green ibis; blue, rufescent tiger and black-capped tiger herons; and savannah and black-collared hawks. We had our first sighting of jabiru storks with their young - the biggest and most prehistoric-looking storks in the area. Watching a jabiru stork take off and fly is incredible, as with its three-metre wingspan it can look like a small plane taking off! As we sat and watched, it became evident that there were hundreds of caimans in the pool, mostly hidden underwater, although they kept on popping up to breathe. It's quite unbelievable how many can exist in such a small space.

Continuing along the dusty road, we stopped at a tree where a common potoo was nesting with its chick. We got some great shots of them huddled up, sometimes opening their mouths in an effort to keep cool. We passed some marsh deer, both male and female, and more hawks lining the route as we drove along. There were a few drops of rain as we drove, but nothing too heavy.



We arrived at Southwild Pantanal to a lovely welcome of some cold juice and a blast of air conditioning. After a quick turnaround, we made our way to the ocelot hide. Except for a brief passing view of a crab-eating fox with a fish in its mouth, we didn't have any luck, so we made our way back to the lodge for dinner and an early night. Despite not seeing an ocelot, the sound of the forest waking up at dusk is an incredible experience and makes a really nice welcome.

Day 3: Southwild Pantanal

Saturday 21 October 2023

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This morning everyone woke up refreshed after a cool night's sleep and a few of us started the day with a short walk around the garden to photograph birds before breakfast. As we sat looking out at the garden during breakfast, a pair of curassows arrived, so some of the group went out to spend some time photographing them.

After breakfast we set out on a boat cruise on the Pixaim River, where we photographed a huge amount of birdlife, caimans and capybaras. We had all four species of kingfisher, including the pygmy which is very cute and lovely to see. A juvenile blue heron was standing guard on a log, disguised as an egret, but Tom distinguished it by the blue colour on its head. We saw a large iguana walking across a beach, and some smaller ones later on. One lovely thing about being in the boat is that you're low down and almost level with the water, so finding capybaras can lead to some lovely images. We came across a couple of families, one eating and another enjoying the cool water and trying to keep out of the sun. We were able to stop the boat for a while and photograph them as they carried on their eating/resting.



The hyacinths and bushes alongside the river make a perfect hiding place and as we moved up and down the river, we saw a number of waders including water rails, sun bitterns and sun grebes, plus smaller birds such as the white-headed water tyrant pair that we sat with for a while. The boat drivers threw a few fish into the river for the black-collared hawk and/or ringed kingfisher to catch, which gave everyone a great opportunity to practice photographing birds in flight, which was then useful for the hawks, vultures and jabiru storks that flew past and overhead.



After returning to the lodge for lunch and a rest, some of us braved the thunder and ominous clouds to go on a walk in the forest along the river from the lodge. Despite the thunder, the rain thankfully never reached us, although the clouds helped to reduce the temperature a little, which made a nice change. We came across a male woodpecker and heard some howler monkeys, and even saw one in the tree above us. We had seen a number of cicada exoskeletons and some people were asking what a cicada looked like, and we managed to find a couple resting on the underside of the trees so they were able to photograph them. We also found two stick insects and some beautiful vines with white orchid-like flowers.

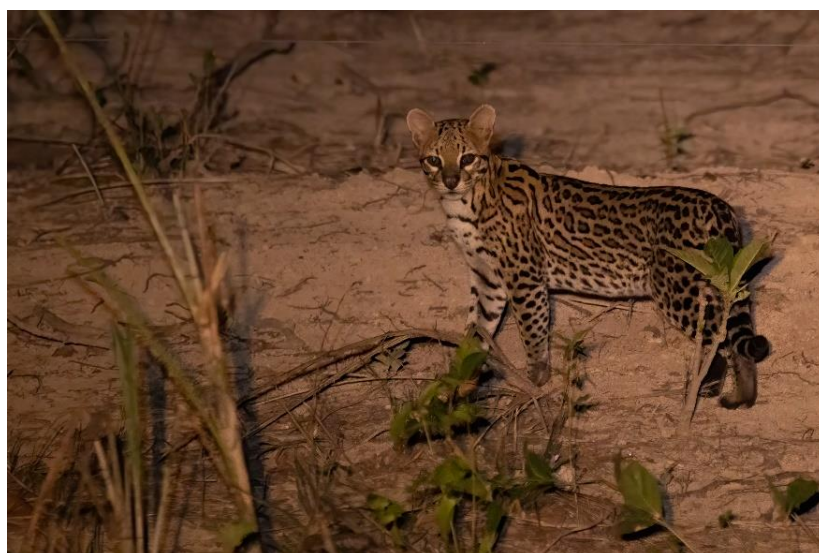
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We returned to the lodge to reunite with the rest of the group for sundowners, including caipirinhas and snacks, before heading to the ocelot hide again. Unfortunately it wasn't to be and the ocelot didn't visit, so we returned to the lodge for dinner.

We decided to go on a night drive to see if we could find any of the more elusive species. We were rewarded with some fantastic sightings, including a number of crab-eating foxes, an ocelot, a great horned owl and three tapirs! Unbelievably one of the tapirs was waiting for us right next to the lodge when we returned, so we quietly got out of the vehicle and went closer on foot, but it was very skittish and retreated into the bushes. Everyone was ready for bed but we did check on the tarantulas nesting before retiring and managed to see four in total. A successful evening.



Day 4: Travel to Jaguarland

Sunday 22 October 2023

It was an early start this morning – after a quick breakfast we were off on our way down the Transpantaneira. The sky was much clearer today so the sun rose and the light became quite harsh quickly. As we drove, we stopped initially for a southern screamer overlooking the wetlands and warming up in the sunshine. We were the other side of it so took a few silhouette shots, which is always good to do if the animal is in the right position. We came across a crab-eating fox running along the road up ahead, so we slowed down and took a few photos. We drove closer and ended up alongside it as it foraged in the undergrowth. It stayed alongside us for a few minutes, before disappearing into the lower wetland area next to the road.

It was very dry along the road, but there was water in some of the lagoons under the bridges, and in some there were a number of baby caimans lying on the bank and/or their parents' backs. Stopping on a bridge to look at the caimans below, we realized there were three black-collared hawks and two crested caracaras sheltering in the canopy from the sunshine.

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We stopped at a farm along the way for a rest stop and to stretch our legs. As we pulled up we heard a couple of hyacinth macaws and a few of us managed to grab some shots of them before they flew off.



We arrived at Porto Jofre (after a small delay for a flat tyre, masterfully changed within 25 minutes by our driver and Tom), where we said goodbye to our driver and boarded our boat for our first taste of what the next few days had in store for us.

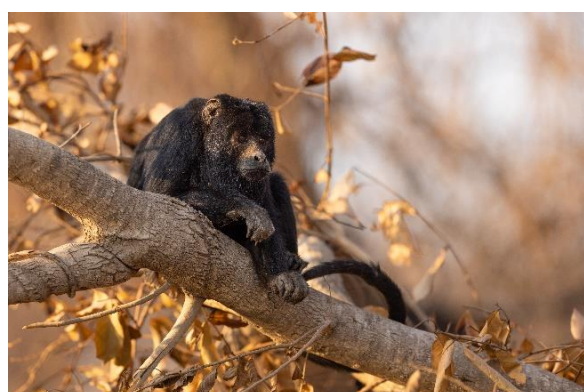
Making our way upriver we enjoyed seeing a lot of birds flying overhead and capybaras and caimans lining the rivers. Unfortunately the heat this year has led to some wildfires, some of which were clearly visible as we travelled. Fires are common around the Pantanal in the dry season, but to see them quite close up was quite a sobering welcome for our group. Luckily nature is wonderful and the vegetation regrows almost immediately, but it's surprising nonetheless.

After lunch and some time to settle in to our new lodge, we returned to the river for an afternoon boat ride. We decided to stay close to the lodge as we had relatively little time before sunset so we cruised down the Cachiri Channel photographing caimans, various species of hawk, eagles and capybaras. On our way back up, as the sun was setting, we came across a band-tailed nighthawk sitting on a branch, which is not commonly seen, and further along a caiman was swimming with something large in its mouth. It took us a while to identify it but we realized it was a southern screamer, which must have got too close to the water for a drink.

Day 5: Full day boat safari in Jaguarland

Monday 23 October 2023

We decided to spend more time close to the Black Channel today and have a break further down the river to see some different areas. We left at 06:00 and made our way down the channels, where we found a male howler monkey quite early on, sitting in the low branches of a tree, warming up in the morning sunshine. Further along the channel three iguanas were licking minerals out of a burnt tree trunk.



As we drove down the Three Brothers River we spotted our first jaguar – a young six-month-old cub of Tina's. Starting off in the river under some hanging vines, she got up on to the low branches of a fallen tree and lay there for some time. We pulled the boat into the bank and sat and watched her for a while until she moved further up the tree, so we crossed the river to watch from a distance. As we were positioning, we heard a commotion and suddenly saw her on the edge of the water, having just caught a quite large iguana. Excellent training for a young one! She stood for a moment and then took her prize into the bushes to enjoy it - so we left her to it.

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We drove towards the Black Channel as we'd heard reports of two jaguars, which had been spotted but were no longer visible. Reports came of another one a few minutes away so we sped off towards that sighting and came across Ryan, a female jaguar of around eight years of age, who currently has two older cubs. She was swimming upstream along the river and we ended up staying with her for around two hours watching her swim first up and then down the river. It's an incredible thing to see a jaguar swimming, as everything you naturally think about cats is that they don't like water – so seeing the strength that these cats have and how deftly they swim is always surprising. She got out a few times, looking like she was considering hunting, but had no success while we watched her. After a couple of hours, we decided to return to the Black Channel to see if any more jaguars were visible there. We found Patricia, one of the older female jaguars in the area, fast asleep under the roots of a tree often used by a number of cormorants. We stopped in the shade nearby for a while, but decided she was not going to move, so we went to the Flotel for lunch. The manager for this season, and jaguar guru Xavi gave the group a fascinating lecture after lunch about jaguars, which was a lovely treat after the morning we'd had.

After we'd filled our water bottles and rested for a while, we went back to the river and navigated further down the Piquiri River. We stopped briefly for a couple of jabiru storks on the beach and two peach-fronted parakeets posing in the bushes before continuing.



Soon after, Tom pointed towards the far bank, where a tapir was wading under the exposed tree roots. As we watched him, he came out of the shade and crossed the river right in front of us, resting when he got to the other side before disappearing into the bushes. Wow! We kept going and within a couple of minutes, we came upon a female tapir swimming close to our boat. She had beautiful colourings, with a white mane and light

features. Obviously an older female, she seemed quite at ease with us and continued swimming before she too got out of the river and disappeared into the bushes.

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We drove back towards the Three Brothers River and as we passed a shallow sandbank, we saw a bird of prey standing on it. It was an osprey, which looked like it was hunting in the flowing waters. We slowed down and stayed next to it for a few minutes. Initially it stood still, but took off a couple of times, attempting to grab a fish (but not succeeding), which gave us some great chances for some in-flight images. You really never know what you're going to find on these rivers!



We did one more circuit of the Black Channel and while we couldn't see any jaguars or otters, we saw something moving in the roots of a fallen tree. It took us a while to establish what it was, but it was a porcupine hiding! This was most of the group's first sighting of one, although you could only really see its nose and foot.

As we travelled back up the Three Brothers River, we spotted a male jaguar (possibly Roy) on the bank on our right, cleverly camouflaged in the tree roots. He walked along the bank for a short while, but then disappeared out of sight, so we continued, stopping briefly when we saw a crane hawk hunting in the nests in the low branches.





We approached the lodge just as the sun was setting, creating some stunning colours across the sky and providing us with a beautiful backdrop for a silhouette of a southern screamer atop a tree.

After we'd freshened up, we had a quick look around the hotel garden to see if we could see any nocturnal wildlife. The group's wishes came through and we came across two porcupines in the high branches of one of the mango trees, so most people went to grab their cameras for some portraits. It was excellent timing to be able to see these after our first sighting earlier.



Day 6: Exploring Jaguarland

Tuesday 24 October 2023

We left earlier today to make the most of the early morning light. We came across a beautiful female jaguar as we were making our way down the Three Brothers River. She walked along the beach and began eating the tall grass growing out of the sand. As with a domestic cat, we watched her eat the grass, lie down and then she was sick. Good to see that some behaviours really are genetic! She walked around a bit more on the bank, drank from the river, and then went into the bushes out of sight. It was incredible to spend time with these beautiful cats with no other boats around. Further down the river we found some guira cuckoos on a tree eating breakfast – they don't tend to sit still, but they're always entertaining to watch.

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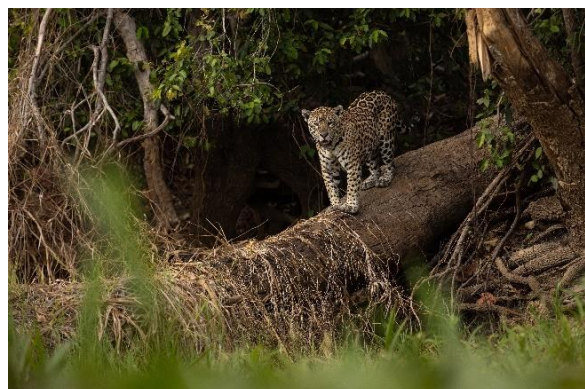
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As we sped down the rivers, there was so much to see that if we had stopped for everything we would never have moved! We do stop briefly for certain things, though, and made a couple of brief stops for a marsh deer, which climbed out of the river up a steep bank, and a black-capped night heron on a low branch.



As we arrived at the Black Channel, we saw a couple of boats so raced over and found Patricia, one of the more familiar cats, walking along the riverbank. We could see the direction she was going, which was towards a fallen tree coming out into the river, so we took a punt that she would stand on it... and were rewarded as she stopped and posed for a few seconds before continuing along the bank. We had a good view of her further down as she came through the thick grass towards us, but then she curled up in the bush and went to sleep.



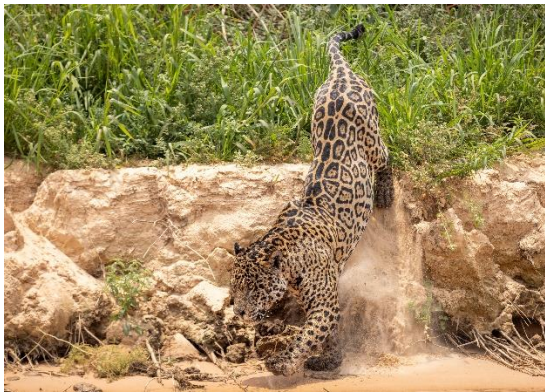
We decided to explore the Cuiabá River, so headed further into the wider riverways and came across a group of three giant river otters. The group had been really keen to find otters, so it was great to see them - and a fantastic sighting to boot. We stayed with them for around 1.5 hours and watched them swim along the river, rest, play, scent mark and hunt. It's always great to see them, but to watch the interactions and to be able to sit and enjoy seeing the different behaviours, especially on what was most of the group's first sighting of them, is something we'll never forget.

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There were quite a few boats sitting at the end of the Black Channel as we returned, and a jaguar was fast asleep behind the tall grass. Some of the group went to the front of the boat and had a view of his head and front feet, but that was it. He sat up at one point but was obviously very comfortable so we started to make our way back up the Three Brothers River, but we weren't finished yet. As we motored, we spotted a large male jaguar on the riverbank. He walked along, with the burnt trees behind him providing some great camouflage, then climbed down to the beach for a drink of water and a short swim before disappearing out of sight.



Our final sighting of the day was a great horned owl in daylight, which is not very common, sitting in the low branches of a tree on the Cachiri Channel. With all the branches, it wasn't an easy image to capture, but we moved the boat around as much as we could to give everyone the best chance. After lunch at the lodge, a few of us went on a walk around the grounds and airfield. Despite some rain, we had some lovely sightings of woodpeckers, an aracari and another great horned owl with slightly less foliage.



Another early start today, leaving at 05:30 down the two smaller channels off the Three Brothers River. These areas are lovely to float along as the pace is much slower and the birds tend to enjoy these narrower channels. We were treated to some rusty-collared seed eaters flitting around the water hyacinths and two young rufescent tiger herons enjoying the shade of a large tree trunk and posing beautifully.

As we were making our way back up the Island Channel, we heard a report that a mother and two older cubs had been seen on another channel, so we made our way over there as quickly as we could. We were alone on the channel and unfortunately despite all of us keeping our eyes peeled, the cats were out of sight by the time we arrived so we looped round on the Cuiabá River towards the main area. As we approached the junction with the main river, we found Ryan swimming in almost the same place we'd seen her a couple of days before. Unfortunately the sun was much brighter today, so the light was much more harsh. We watched her approach and cross a beach, which was lovely to see, but as she got back into the water we decided to carry on. We passed another boat stopped by the riverbank and caught a quick glimpse of an older female jaguar walking through a clearing before going out of sight again. We sat for a few minutes to see if she might emerge, and as we were there a giant river otter appeared right next to us. It was a lone otter and could clearly smell the jaguar, so with a couple of warning calls it swam off. The sky was starting to cloud over and look a little more ominous all of a sudden, so we decided it was time for lunch and made our way to the Flotel.

Xavi gave us a lecture on otters today and it was lovely to be able to understand more about the behaviours we'd seen the day before. With only 30-50, individuals left in the wild we counted ourselves very lucky that we'd spent such a good amount of time with them the previous day. And there was more to come...

After more time to rest after lunch and a caipirinha, we returned to the river for the afternoon. On the Black Channel we found the three otters that we'd spent time with the day before. Today they were very playful, and spent their time playing with each other and scent marking. It felt like the perfect sighting following Xavi's talk. We spent over an hour with them but as they started to disperse and swim among the water hyacinth, we heard that a jaguar had been spotted up the Three Brothers River, so we started to make our way back towards the lodge.



After a few minutes we saw a couple of boats up ahead so we slowed and pulled up alongside them. Two jaguars, a male and female, were lying on the top of the bank in the shade. Standing up in the boat, most people could see the female, but the male was quite hidden behind a tree trunk just showing its paws every so often as he rolled over. Unfortunately they were not keen to move and the sun was starting to get quite low, so we had to start making our way back to the lodge - with some sundowners en route – as we reflected on some wonderful sightings.

We arrived back to some lovely caipirinhas for us to cool off, and enjoyed our final dinner in the northern Pantanal.

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Day 8: Leaving the Northern Pantanal

Thursday 26 October 2023

We left Porto do Capivara at sunrise this morning, prepared for our long transfer day. Despite being on the lookout for jaguars, we didn't see any this morning but we had some lovely caimans and a variety of birds to see us off. We were very happy with our total of 12 (and a foot!) jaguars during our stay. When we arrived at Porto Jofre, we heard a hyacinth macaw so made our way over to where the noise had come from. We found one macaw sitting very low in the tree, next to a nest hole. She posed beautifully for some photos and everyone had a chance to see and appreciate this beautiful bird.

As we were photographing the macaw, some stunning butterflies were landing and enjoying the sap on a tree trunk next to us.

After we'd had a few minutes to enjoy the wildlife and a chance to stretch our legs, we started our journey back up the Transpantaneira, thankfully in an air-conditioned vehicle. On one of the bridges, as we slowed we spotted a false water cobra making its way along the logs lying in the water. We had time to get out of the vehicle and go and grab some quick photos before continuing.



We stopped at the familiar comfort of SouthWild Pantanal for a cooling welcome drink and some lunch and then continued on to the airport, where we said our sad goodbyes to Tom.

With everything having gone swimmingly with a comfortable transfer, the local airlines threw us a curveball by first delaying and then cancelling our evening flight to São Paulo. After a protracted wait with not much clarity, we decided to fly direct to Campo Grande overnight. Thankfully the team at the other end were able to collect us and we made our way, after a stop for coffee and breakfast, to the lodge a little earlier than planned for some much needed rest.

Day 9: Bonito

Friday 27 October 2023

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After resting for a while this morning, we spent some time enjoying the wildlife around the lodge grounds, including a pair of red and green macaws that came to feed close to the rooms, posing for some photos in the trees.

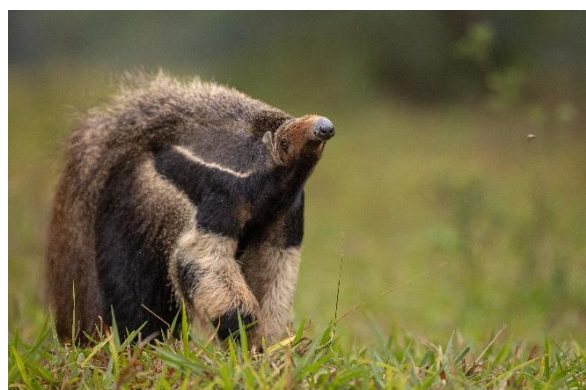
After some lunch, we went out for an afternoon drive to see if we could find any anteaters. André, our local guide, told us that the anteaters were much more active in the mornings at the moment so it was unlikely, but worth a look. Unfortunately we couldn't find any this afternoon, but we did find a pair of burrowing owls guarding a nest around some termite mounds so we managed to take some lovely shots of them both together and individually, standing on the nest and in flight. We found a small group of red and green macaws feeding on a palm tree, so we watched for a while then returned to the lodge to get ready for dinner. We went to a local Turkish restaurant with some delicious food, before returning for a good night's sleep.



Day 10: Bonito

Saturday 28 October 2023

This morning's drive demonstrated why we sometimes drive back and forth in the same area, because in the same fields we'd driven past last night we found 11 anteaters before breakfast! We spotted the first one heading towards the road and watched it cross in front of us, but it must have picked up our scent as it scuttled off into the trees. Carrying on we saw another one eating in the field, so we climbed through the fence towards it, careful to stay downwind. We ended up with it right in front of us, happily feeding on termite mounds and in tree roots. We were able to get quite close and watch it for about 20 minutes, while another two were in different directions around us.



We drove further on and found one next to a gate, making it easier for everyone to see it and get close. It stayed close for a long time giving the group ample opportunity for photographs from various angles.

Happy with our success, we returned to the lodge for breakfast. We had another visit from some red and green macaws and then some of the group walked around the grounds doing some macro photography. When you look closer, there is so much to be found, and the trees around the grounds provide ample places to find a huge range of species. One of our most amazing finds was a group of lichen huntsman spiders, sitting still on a tree trunk - although once spooked, they run

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incredibly fast. They were very hard to see, but once you get your eye in there were quite a few on two or three of the trees nearby, some with egg sacks.



A walk on the paths by the pond led us to discover leaf hoppers, jumping spiders and more.



As well as the trees providing homes for spiders and other invertebrates, the small bushes are also teeming with life.



After some time to explore, we went to Mimosa, a nearby reserve, for a lovely organic lunch and the opportunity to walk some trails. We were treated to some lovely sightings of red-legged seriema, tegu lizards and lots of butterflies and insects.

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On a walk around the trail, we found a huge amount including a stick insect, amazing rhinoceros leaf hopper, spiders and more.



As we were leaving, we heard hyacinth macaws and found a pair guarding their nest box.

We drove back past some different fields to see if the anteater activity was any higher there in the afternoons, but it was as quiet as it had been in the fields we visited yesterday, so we went back to the lodge, where we had dinner.

It's always worth going out after dark as the wildlife changes completely. We had to be careful about where we stepped as long lines of leaf-cutter ants were all over the forest floor. Two scorpions were fighting on a tree stump, and there were geckos and frogs looking for food.



Day 11: Bonito

Sunday 29 October 2023

We awoke this morning to the sound of rain, which was a worry as we were concerned that it would affect our sightings. As we were settling into the minibus and making our way up the driveway, we suddenly saw an anteater foraging in the bushes along the edge of the hotel grounds! As it was still very early and cloudy, the light was terrible, but it was a lovely surprise to see one in the grounds.

We drove to the same fields as yesterday and were rewarded straight away with one anteater in a field on either side of us; from then on we kept spotting more until we had seen seven in total, with one walking so close to us, that it was too close for most of our lenses, giving us the opportunity for

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some close-up portrait images. We enjoyed standing and sitting in the various fields watching these fascinating creatures foraging for food in the termite mounds. They were not affected by our presence at all.



The variety of fields gives a good variety of backdrop so you can get some trees/forests or open fields, which lets you be more creative with angles.

We were keen to return to the burrowing owls so we drove to the final field, where they were nesting and as they were on their nest we walked over to see them. As we were photographing them on the nest and flying between their watch points, some toco toucans flew over us and we saw another couple of anteaters, so we walked up towards one in some white flowers, but it was moving quite quickly so we decided it was time to make our way back for breakfast. On our way back we saw an American kestrel high up in a tree and two campo flickers, which sat for a few minutes on fence posts to pose before flying off.



The rest of the day was free for everyone to enjoy the hotel and relax. Some of the group took time out to relax after breakfast, while others of us went out with our macro lenses. We discovered a huge number of different species and had a great time with the smaller things.



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Two of our most exciting finds were a shield bug sheltering her babies underneath her under a leaf ,and a flatid planthopper nymph, which looks like a walking piece of popcorn!



As well as insects, the rain had encouraged some frogs out and although they were fast, we managed to grab a few shots.



After dark, another walk in the grounds proved that there was still a lot to be seen, including a beautiful mantis well camouflaged on the same trees where we'd found the huntsman spiders.

We regrouped for dinner at a local restaurant, where one of the group had a personal tutorial on how to make caiprinhas to keep the Brazil feeling going at home.



Day 12: Bonito

Monday 30 October 2023

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This morning was left free so the group could choose to have a lie-in, explore the grounds in search of birds, insects and more, or simply relax until we had to leave. Those who were up were treated to another anteater in the grounds of the lodge, a touco toucan around its nest high up in the tree canopy, and a group of red and green macaws.



We left the lodge at around 07:30 and drove for around one hour until we reached Buraco das Araras. It was very hot, so we stocked up on water and walked to the platform where we spent the next couple of hours enjoying incredible views of the sinkhole and the red and green macaws, which use it for nesting. We had a visit from a motmot quite close to us and some fly-pasts by touco toucans. Most of the birds flying across the sinkhole were red and green macaws and buff necked ibis. There are two platforms from which you can view the sinkhole. We spent the first couple of hours at the first platform, photographing the macaws as they flew past/over and watching the birds enjoying the thermals around the hole.



After the activity reduced due to the heat, we moved to the second platform for a while, before returning to the reception area to cool down with some ice lollies before making our way to Rio do Prata for lunch. We had some time to walk around the gardens, where we saw some red-legged seriemas and two young buff-necked ibis chicks in a nest, as well as some tiny crab spiders, butterflies and baby assassin bugs on the beautiful flowers.

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We made our way to Campo Grande, stopping for a few minutes at the Avenida das Araras just as the sun was starting to set and shining beautiful warm light on the red-bellied and blue-and-yellow macaws returning to their nests in the dead palm tree trunks.



When the light finally went we drove to the hotel where we freshened up and had our final dinner.

Day 13: Transfer to the airport

Saturday 30 October 2023

It was time to bid farewell to Brazil, the very hot climate, and André, as we were transferred to the airport to catch our flights home via São Paulo.

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