

Tour Report Best of Brazil

3 - 21 July 2023

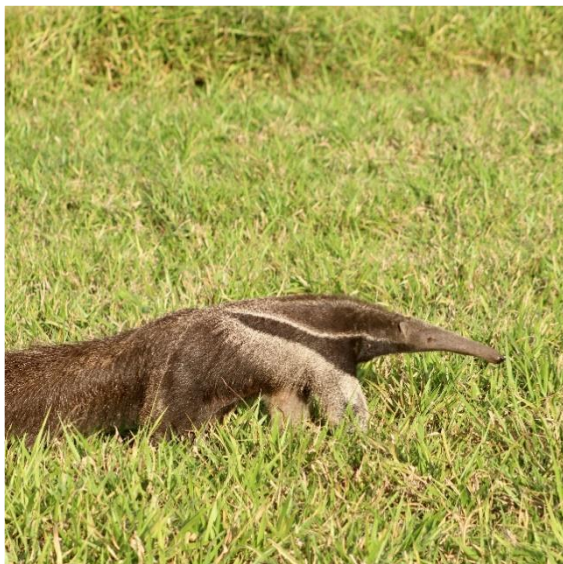
Maned wolf



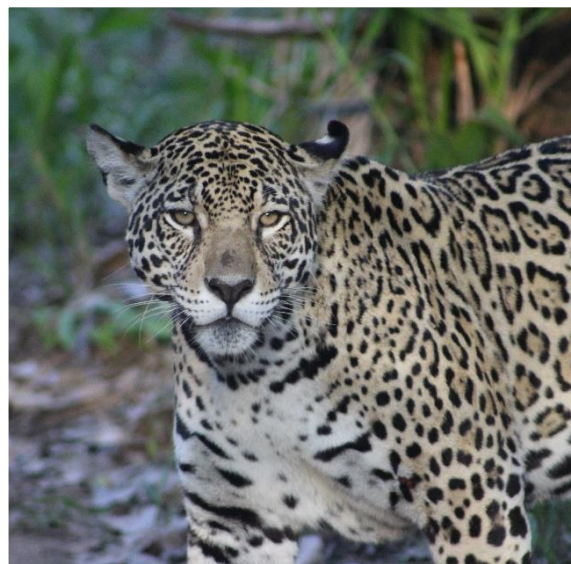
Harpy eagle



Giant anteater



Jaguar



Compiled by Helen Bryon
Maned wolf & harpy eagle by Ted Smith

Our inaugural Best of Brazil holiday certainly packed a punch wildlife-wise, taking in three distinct ecosystems. Visiting the Cerrado first, our aim was to find maned wolf. We were successful on six out of eight excursions, thanks to the assistance provided by the Onçafari NGO. Many of the Cerrado's wildlife inhabitants are nocturnal, so we expected other mammal sightings to be thin on the ground, despite being in the most bio-diverse savannah on the planet!

Our next destination was the mighty Amazon, which we explored by boat and on foot. Birding was our main focus and we were fortunate enough to experience a phenomenal harpy eagle sighting. We also encountered various primates, reptiles, amphibians and Lepidoptera, not to mention some incredible flora.

Our final stop was the superb Southern Pantanal, where we were successful in our quest for both giant anteater and jaguar. We covered a lot of ground and experienced some long travel days, but the lodges were wonderful and the wildlife rewards were plentiful!

Day 1: London Heathrow to São Paulo

Monday 3 July 2023

We met at the departure gate for our direct overnight service with LATAM Airlines to São Paulo-Gaurulhos International Airport; the flight departed slightly behind schedule.

Day 2: São Paulo to Brasília

Tuesday 4 July 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 25°C

The airline made up time in the air, so we arrived at Terminal 3 early in the morning. We cleared immigration, collected our baggage and passed through customs, before dropping our bags off for our connecting flight to Brasília. Making our way to Terminal 2, we passed through security and arrived at the gate with just a little time to spare before boarding.

After arriving at our destination, we were met by our guide Lucio and driven in a comfortable air-conditioned minibus to our hotel, the Windsor Plaza. Most of us keenly accepted the late breakfast that the hotel had kept aside for us. We agreed to meet again at 2.30 pm, before settling into our comfortably appointed rooms.

Four of our party went on a vehicle-based afternoon tour of Brasilia with Lucio, while the rest of us decided to enjoy the city on foot. Three hours later, we reconvened at the hotel bar and enjoyed a drink or two before our buffet dinner.

Day 3: Brasília to Trijunção

Wednesday 5 July 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 25°C

After an early buffet breakfast, we departed for the Cerrado, the Brazilian savannah, at 7 am sharp. Our 15-seater minibus was air-conditioned and comfortable. After stopping to use the facilities shortly before 9 am, we continued on our way and arrived at Mambaí at 11.10 am. We disembarked and were greeted by Joao, the manager of Pousada Trijunção. We split our group across two vehicles (one SUV and one pick-up) for the last 90 minutes of our journey. As we traversed the dirt roads, we passed cotton, soy and corn farms. En route to the Trijunção Private Reserve, we sighted rheas and red-legged seriemas.

We arrived at Pousada Trijunção just before 1 pm and opened our doors to beautiful blooms and a glorious riot of birdsong in the garden. We had a quick introduction by Marissa, one of the biologists, then we were shown our beautiful rooms, which had been simply but effectively decorated using natural materials. Our first impressions of the accommodation were fabulous, so we couldn't wait to get out and explore.

A Chopi blackbird was the first bird to capture our attention when we met in the courtyard a few minutes later. However, it was quickly usurped by a stunning swallow-tailed hummingbird that obligingly posed for

multiple photos. During lunch (all our meals were à la carte), we trained our binoculars on a curl-crested jay and some chalk-browed mockingbirds, before being absolutely delighted by the sight of black-tufted marmosets tucking into the papaya and bananas on the feeding station in the vegetable garden. Scaled doves, tanagers, parakeets and narrow-billed tinamou all made appearances at another feeding station, as did our first guinea pigs. Suffice it to say we were loving the lodge!

At 4.30 pm we watched a presentation from Isabella, a biologist and guide from Onçafari. The NGO has a base on the reserve and works towards the preservation and conservation of threatened species and land across Brazil. At Pousada Trijunção, their main interest (if you'll excuse the pun) is the maned wolf. They have identified 17 individuals and have collared a number of them in order to better understand their movements and behaviour. However, there are many more uncollared animals scattered across the area. Buoyed by our new-found knowledge about the wolves, we boarded our roofed 9-seater open-sided vehicle at 5 pm and set out into the savannah to explore. Maju, our driver, negotiated the roads with care as Isabella kept up a commentary on what we were seeing.

We came across a lone blue-and-yellow macaw and then startled two pampas deer, who fled into the thick vegetation. At 5.40 pm, we reached a site where a 13-month-old maned wolf had been left in the morning; we used telemetry to ascertain if it was still there. It was, so we turned off the engine and sat down to enjoy our sandwiches, cake and local fruit juice while waiting to see if it would get up when the sun slunk below the horizon.

A pair of Aplomado falcons flew past as the last of the light faded and we could just make them out perching on a termite mound. Another Onçafari vehicle was nearby and we kept in communication to see if the wolf would move towards them, or us, as it began its nightly activities. A change in signal indicated that it was up and mobile, so we circled the area with a spotlight in the hope of obtaining a visual. After driving for a while with no success, so we decided to try a neighbouring territory, belonging to one of the wolf's siblings. Fresh tracks were spotted and our adrenaline levels increased, especially after we stopped to investigate a strong smell in the air, which turned out to be wolf urine. It had clearly been marking its territory. After continuing a while longer without a sighting, we decided to call it quits and head for home.

Anticipation is all part of the experience and although we hadn't been lucky this evening, we had been close. We enjoyed a lovely dinner before retiring to our supremely comfortable beds.

Day 4: Morning ornithological walk and afternoon safari

Thursday 6 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

After gathering for coffee and cake at 5.30 am, we met our guide, Vini, a resident biologist and ornithologist who had been working onsite for three years. Fifteen minutes later we accompanied him up the lodge's observation tower to start our morning activity, a nature walk. We watched as he called owls using both his mobile phone and his (impressive!) vocal chords. As the colours of the sky began to change in the east, we heard more and more bird calls, especially from red-and-green macaws.

In the increasing light, we watched as a flock of white woodpeckers gathered on a dead tree in front of us. We also observed a host of other species before descending and starting our walk. Heading out past the swimming pool, we saw the tracks of a maned wolf that had clearly walked right past the lodge during the night. The smaller tracks of a crab-eating fox were also seen.

We spent the next few hours birding, increasing our species list exponentially, and learning from Vini's seemingly inexhaustible avian knowledge!

Some members of the group, who had an interest in botany, stopped to read mounted signs on the trees. The signs detailed the local and Latin names, the flowering and fruiting seasons and the traditional uses of

the trees. Later, we watched leaf-cutter ants as they carried their large loads under an increasingly warm sun as our guide talked us through ways to identify more animal tracks.

Back at the lodge, we sat down to a full breakfast, then spent the rest of the day at our leisure. The pool was appealing and birding around the lodge was also popular (Vini was on hand all day).

At 3.30 pm, we mounted our safari vehicle for an afternoon drive. Mammals proved to be a little thin on the ground, but we enjoyed two brief sightings of pampas deer. We headed to an area of the reserve where three of Brazil's states meet, Bahia, Goiás and Minas Gerais; Trijunção translates to 'three junctions'. From high on an escarpment, we toasted a gorgeous sunset with sparkling wine and a variety of homemade snacks. What a treat!

Night fell and our night drive commenced. We came across nightjars and nighthawks, before being informed that a vehicle close to the lodge was currently with a maned wolf that appeared to be on a kill. We made the easy decision to try our luck with the wolf and drove to the scene as quickly as possible, despite being some way away. On arrival, we could hear the wolf eating (it had killed an armadillo), but we couldn't see it due to the long grass. After sitting quietly for some time, we watched as a barn owl flew by and the wolf moved. Most of the group glimpsed it moving through the grass, the profile of its back and head just about visible before it disappeared. Through the use of a thermal imaging camera belonging to one of the clients, we learned that it had flopped down in the grass. Although we couldn't see the animal, we had seen its tracks, smelt its urine and many had now seen its profile. Things were moving in the right direction!

After another tasty dinner, we retired to bed hoping for more luck the following day.

Day 5: Morning and afternoon safari

Friday 7 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

Was it a good omen that we woke to the sounds of a maned wolf roar-barking? Indeed it was! Following an early breakfast, we left the lodge at 6 am and within minutes we saw a wolf standing at a junction just ahead of us. As it registered our approach, it ran down the road away from us before turning right into the bush. We pulled up level with it and cut our engine, watching it as it marked its territory around 10 metres away from us, under a thicket of bushes.

Raising its thick, bushy white tail repeatedly, the wolf moved from side to side and then started to walk back towards us. Before we had the chance to get excited about a closer encounter, it turned 180 degrees and disappeared into the bush. Grinning like Cheshire Cats, we were thrilled at what we had just witnessed...but we wanted more! We circled the block a few times before continuing on our way when it became apparent that the long-legged creature had disappeared.

On our journey, we were side-tracked by a laughing falcon and several other new avian species sightings, including coal-crested finch, grey monjita and various parakeets.

Mammals were proving somewhat elusive, but a few of the clients needed to stretch their legs. Having jumped down from the vehicle, they noticed a number of tracks in the road and more of us stepped down for a closer look. During the highly enjoyable but impromptu walk that followed, we identified maned wolf, crab-eating fox, rhea, red-legged seriema, opossum and some snake tracks! We also indulged in a little maned wolf scat dissection, while discussing ant lions, seed pods and various other signs left by the creatures that had traversed the area before us.

The reserve's breeding centre was a kilometre down the road and we were taken through the work they do there by Fabiana and Carol. The centre breeds peccary, rhea and tortoise and also has a rehabilitation centre, where animals are cared for before being reintroduced to the wild, if possible. We saw tapir and brown brocket deer and, as we were leaving, a flock of Guira cuckoos and a yellow-headed vulture. It was already

11.30 am, so we headed home, catching a fleeting glance of a 6-banded armadillo on the way. We ate lunch and had some well-deserved downtime.

In the afternoon, the group split up and we all headed out at 4.30 pm. Our planned excursion was a boat trip after sundown to search for Cuvier's dwarf caiman. The boat accommodates a maximum of five clients, plus the driver and spotter, so we left the lodge in two vehicles, with one group doing a full drive with the Onçafari team and the other doing a shorter drive with Vini, followed by caiman spotting.

The group with Onçafari headed to a part of the reserve we had not yet visited, where they drove along the banks of a long, narrow and beautiful palm-lined lagoon, which was teeming with blue-and-yellow macaws. The group stopped, overlooking a large, relatively open grassy plain where a signal had been picked up for a young male maned wolf. They sat for a while, enjoying the quiet as the sky changed colour and dusk fell.

Once the signal indicated that the wolf was up and moving, the group scanned the area through binoculars, catching sight of him briefly, then glimpsing his eye shine in the spotlight as he walked away. They followed in his general direction in the hope that he may cross the road, but he appeared to stop in a thick bush, so they headed back towards the lodge hoping to pick up the resident male there. Sure enough, luck was on their side and he was seen by spotlight, walking ahead and then turning down the road towards them, before turning into the bush once more. After watching him sitting for a few brief movements, they returned to the lodge happy!

The other group enjoyed a little birding before heading to the reserve's boundary with the national park. It was there that they experienced an incredible encounter with a juvenile uncollared wolf. Just before sundown, Vini spotted the individual in the road ahead. It crossed into an adjacent field, before returning to the road. The wolf was both hugely inquisitive and a little nervous, but it surprised us by running towards the vehicle, stopping just a few metres away! It stood its ground and even moved cautiously closer. For approximately eight minutes (though it felt like half an hour!), the group watched enthralled until eventually it walked into the national park. What an extraordinary encounter.

Moving on, the group then came across obliging burrowing owls that posed for photos. Later, as darkness approached and they went to leave the area, the wolf reappeared briefly. The second group ended their evening by successfully spotting three Cuvier's dwarf caiman in Laguna das Araras. The Milky Way was reflected beautifully in the still water below, grins were wide and hearts were full upon their return to the lodge for dinner.

Day 6: Grande Sertão Veredas National Park and afternoon safari

Saturday 8 July 2023

Weather: Sunny, 27°C

The group reconvened for a morning visit to Parque Nacional Grande Sertão Veredas. Breakfast was from 5 am, shortly before our departure at 5.30 am. Our daily sightings began when a crab-eating fox ran ahead of us in the road. During the one-hour drive to the park, which borders our reserve, we watched as the rising sun transformed from a deep, burnt orange to clementine. On arrival, we drove straight in (there were no formalities to go through to gain entry).

The park consists of fields, forests and grasslands and as the morning commenced, we crossed all three, noting the tracks of tapir, puma, jaguar and maned wolf along the way. We enjoyed some birding, with Guira tanager and spot-backed puffbird being firm favourites. When we reached the lagoon oasis, we began our search for great horned owl. Vini and the group crossed a dam wall, while Hi - another biologist driver guide - walked around a bank of tall palm trees and found the owl for us. Although it proved to be a little shy, we were able to see it and get a few pictures before it flew off.

A rufous-tailed jacamar kept us entertained as we walked along a crystal clear stream to search for more wildlife. As the sun became more intense, we stopped to enjoy some fresh juice and cake under tree cover

before retracing our steps and heading back towards the lodge. We arrived at the lodge at 11 am and spent some time relaxing in our surroundings. Then we found our first nine-banded armadillo right behind one of the bedrooms, which was foraging for termites. Tip-toeing around the area, we spent quite some time searching for the armadillo after it disappeared down burrows only to re-appear a short time later.

We departed the lodge at 4.30 pm, swapping over for the afternoon, so that the other half of the group could go out with Onçafari. This group successfully found a young female maned wolf who had recently had pups. They had started by scouring the area around her den, but had struggled to pick up signal and decided to try another wolf. However, with the help of a thermal imaging scope, she was suddenly seen trotting along, jumping on prey (a bird that got away) and zigzagging along close to the vehicle. She hadn't been seen for some time, so the research team were beside themselves with excitement! A while later, after dropping most of the group back at the lodge, two clients went back out into the field to try their hand at star photography. Away from the lodge and light pollution, the results of their efforts were simply superb!

The other half of the group visited the national park border in the hope of another sighting of the uncollared wolf. The fields glowed orange under the setting sun and we drove towards the firebreak, scouring the area ahead. Vini was following tracks and, after going as far as we could, the group did a U-turn. Then he spotted eye shine in an adjacent field. We sat in the darkness with bated breath and suddenly, there it was! The wolf walked right in front of us, its white, bushy tail clearly illuminated by our spotlight. We followed it until it turned into the vegetation and disappeared into the night.

Two crab-eating foxes posed by the side of the road for us, then as we headed towards the lagoon to try our luck with the caiman, we had to screech to a halt to avoid a rattlesnake in the road ahead. Startled by us, it shook its rattle fiercely before more calmly turning off the road and very slowly, moving into the undergrowth. Its beautiful diamond patterning was clearly visible along its back and we were chatting animatedly about it when a tropical screech owl landed on a branch above our heads. Glaring at us intently, it really did look cross!

We boarded our boat and set off into the night, beneath the Milky Way. We glided through the calm waters of the lagoon towards various sets of eyes along the bank which were illuminated by the spotlight. A few dove at our approach, but we had some success, drawing level with a juvenile wolf, then an adult a few hundred metres further away. Suddenly Vini killed the spotlight and exclaimed, "Puma!"

He could hear one calling, but try as we might, the rest of us couldn't hear anything other than the roosting macaws we had disturbed in the palm above us. Vini was on Cloud Nine though and his enthusiasm was infectious!

We enjoyed hot chocolate back at the vehicle, then on our drive home, we were interrupted by another reptile. We stopped to let a false coral snake cross the road - its striking colours concluded a great night of wildlife watching. We ended the day with caipirinhas back at the lodge.

Day 7: Trijunção to Cuiabá

Sunday 9 July 2023

Weather: Sunny and clear, 27°C

Our departure time for our last safari was 5.45 am. Heading out with the Onçafari team, we picked up a signal for a young male right next to the lodge, but as he was in thick vegetation we decided to try our luck with a larger, older male a few kilometres away. Just as we picked up tracks in the road for him, we received a signal too and we were able to ascertain that he was moving in an easterly direction, not far away from us. Moving slowly, we closed the gap, getting frequent fleeting glimpses of him as he trotted alongside us in the bush. The anticipation was marvellous as we scoured the landscape looking for our next fix of him!

At one stage we positioned ourselves so that if he crossed the road, he would likely do so directly in front of us. Our patience was rewarded when he shot across (too fast for us to take photos though). We continued

to follow his general direction, keeping our distance so as not influence his behaviour. He was heading towards a dried-out lagoon with a central cluster of palm trees, very close to our lodge, which is known to be a favoured bedding-down spot. Our final sighting was of him walking calmly towards this oasis, a fitting farewell to an incredible time in this superb reserve.

A few hours later, after packing and having a last wander around the lodge, we said goodbye to Joao and his team and departed in two vehicles for Mambai. There, we bade farewell to Pedro and to Vini, who with his incredible enthusiasm, spotting ability, sense of humour and encyclopedic knowledge of the local birdlife, had been an undoubted highlight of our stay.

We met up with Lucio again and continued our journey to Brasília, where after dinner at a local restaurant overlooking the lake, we were dropped off at the airport for our onward flight to Cuiabá.

We arrived late in the evening and were whisked away to our overnight accommodation at Gran Odara Hotel, 20 minutes away. It had been a long travel day and we immediately retired for the evening.

Day 8: Cuiabá to Alta Floresta

Monday 10 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 37°C

Following breakfast, we left our hotel at 8.45 am for our transfer to Cuiabá airport. Arriving 20 minutes later, we made good time as we had been warned to anticipate roadworks potentially causing traffic problems. Our 75-minute flight to Alta Floresta departed on time at 11.40 am and we were full of anticipation for our upcoming time in the Amazon.

We drove through Alta Floresta, a town established 36 years ago as a gold mining centre. Gold mining was usurped by the timber industry and although cattle followed, today the primary emphasis is soya bean production. As we left town, our 15-seater minibus negotiated a dirt road for approximately 50 minutes. Cultivated fields and rows of maize gave way to intermittent tracts of forest, gradually increasing in frequency. Looking ahead, the trees began to stretch for the sky, dwarfing our route, and sure enough, we were officially entering the Cristalino Private Reserve.

When we reached the Teles Pires River at 2.30 pm, we disembarked and met our guide, Cynthia, and our driver, Clibert Ricardo. Our luggage was transferred onto a long motorised boat as we boarded a 10-seater (open) boat, donned our life jackets and set off. Almost immediately, we came across terns and swallows and we watched as the warmer 'white' waters of Teles Pires merged into the cooler 'black' Cristalino River (the darker colour comes from more acidic soil and leaf litter stain). Clear markings on tree trunks and roots portrayed the three-metre seasonal water differential and with levels lower at this time of year, we were able to see holes in the riverbank made by armored catfish during the summer, these spaces were being used by kingfishers.

There was a profusion of butterflies. These butterflies eat salt from the banks and extract moisture from the eyes of other creatures, a phenomenon we witnessed a little further upriver. Our attention was drawn by a swarm of lemon-coloured butterflies, repeatedly flitting and settling on a worn tree trunk that had fallen into the river. As we approached, we could see that they were swarming a Geoffroy's side-necked terrapin. We watched as it stretched its neck out before leaping into the river for some respite. It was a truly glorious sight! We continued towards the lodge, taking in kingfishers, herons and other water birds along the way (the boat transfer can be done in half an hour or so, but we took our time, enjoying the novelty of river travel).

When we reached the floating pontoon that provides access to Cristalino Lodge, we were met by a troop of brown capuchin monkeys flying through the canopy above. We passed an orientation map board, clearly showing the 30 kilometres or so of trails found around the reserve. Once firmly ensconced at the main communal area, we were welcomed with drinks and a snack. Vini (another one!) introduced himself as our

host, and he proceeded to take our orders for dinner (dinner orders are taken during lunch service and lunch orders for the next day at dinner time).

After being shown to our lovely air-conditioned rooms, we reconvened half an hour or so later for our first excursion. We re-boarded our boat and set off upriver for a brief walk through the rainforest to a salt lick. Hoping we may come across peccaries or tapir, we waited until dusk fell. We watched as bats flitted down to the water to drink along with a single boat-billed heron.

We headed back to the lodge in darkness, just in time for dinner at 7.30 pm. Most of the group retired to bed soon afterwards, but the two clients who chose to have coffee by the fire pit saw their first paca.

Day 9: Exploring the Amazon

Tuesday 11 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 37°C

Breakfast was served from 6 am, during which we watched a male and female bare-faced cassowary walk past the dining room. At 7 am, we met for an orientation walk around the lodge. Scarlet macaws flew overhead, as did oropendolas. We could smell wild cocoa flowers, which strangely had a lemongrass fragrance. 45 minutes later we set off upriver. Along the way we were distracted by birdlife and a caiman which was sunning itself close to the lodge.

Four black-throated nunbirds posed in a row on a branch and hummingbirds tried to distract us (successfully) as we made our way to the 1.4-kilometre Brazil Nut Trail. Steps enabled us to negotiate the riverbank to the rainforest trail and we were immediately taken aback by the varying shapes and textures of the vegetation around us, as well as by the myriad of shades of green illuminating our path as sunlight penetrated the canopy. Lichen, fungi and moss grew on tree trunks and we saw a screaming piha perched far above us - its cry synonymous with the sound of the forest.

Cicada towers (like miniature termite mounds) were growing up from the forest floor and inches of army ants were traversing the leaf-strewn paths. We stopped to view two trapdoor spider nests, ingeniously built into the ground in a perfect cylinder shape, topped with a hinged 'roof' covered by leaves. We also tested a local insect repellent, provided by electric ants.

Next, we came across our first blue morpho butterfly, its stunning iridescence was an absolute highlight, although we saw many other butterfly species too. A masked tityra stole the bird show and we stood in awe, next to an 800-year-old Brazil nut tree, after which the trail is named. Once back on the boat, we ate fresh Brazil nuts, which were large and juicy, while some brown capuchin monkeys saw us off. We returned to the lodge with a little time to spare before lunch at 12.30 pm.

We set off again at 4 pm, this time headed for Tower II, one of the lodge's 50-metre canopies. We crossed the river and walked 800 metres to its base. We began our ascent, negotiating trails of army ants carrying termites as we went, and around 280 steps later, we were at the top! The view was breathtaking and we were welcomed by a pair of scarlet macaws flying beneath us.

As we scanned the view with our binoculars and our naked eyes, we added a number of new species to our checklist, including spangled cotinga, bare-necked fruitcrow and golden-winged parakeet. Cynthia set up her scope and pointed out a troop of spider monkeys sitting openly in branches below us. We observed how they used their prehensile tails as they leapt acrobatically, hung from the branches and interacted with one another. Time passed quickly, as we took in the immensity of the forest beneath us. Before we knew it, the light had changed and a golden hue descended as the setting sun dipped below our westward horizon. The sky's colours deepened as we made our way back down to the, by now, dark rainforest floor. We retraced our steps back to the river and crossed over to the lodge.

Over dinner at 7.30 pm, we met back up with two of our party who had opted to do the two-and-a-half kilometre Old Salt Lick Trail from the lodge with another guide, Bruno. White-nosed saki monkeys and a miniature frog were highlights for them.

After dinner, four of us set off on a night walk at 9 pm. Heading towards a nearby salt lick, we noticed fungi attached to a tree trunk that appeared to be smoking. On closer inspection, it was releasing spores and we watched enthralled, never having seen this phenomenon before. A little later, when we arrived at our destination, hundreds of bats were flying over the salt lick, swooping and diving around us, missing us by inches.

A colony of leaf-cutter ants at least a foot thick, was busy carrying prized off-shoots back to the fungi that they feed, grow and consume. The Milky Way was glittering above us, with just a few stars shining through the canopy, so we switched our torches off and enjoyed a few moments of silence to take everything in. We could just hear and feel the movement of the bats around us. It was magical.

Day 10: Exploring the Amazon

Wednesday 12 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 36°C

We set off upriver at 6.15 am, heading towards the Vale Trail. We were immediately captivated by three sunbitterns right by our jetty and watched as two of them reinforced their pair bond, standing bill to bill, necks rising and falling as they called to each other. When they moved away to start their daily business, we continued on our way. We had a bumper journey viewing curl-crested aracari, paradise jacamar, red-necked woodpecker and green, as well as green-and-rufus kingfishers along the way.

We started our walk at 7.35 am and entered the cool forest interior. This was a new trail and it immediately felt very different from our experience the previous day - more ancient somehow. The path was less clear-cut and soon we were engulfed by a thousand shades of green once again. We regularly stopped to feel various leaf and moss textures as we passed by.

We noticed a large granite outcrop rising to our right and we slowly began to ascend it, pulling ourselves up with ropes where necessary, before arriving at an open area with superb 180 degree views. We walked across a carpet of fallen flowers and noticed beautiful yellow orchids all around. A scan with our binoculars revealed several new bird species and once we'd had a good slug of water, we set off for the next viewpoint.

We reached another granite outcrop and enjoyed a little birding. The temperature continued to rise, so after a while we headed back down into the cooler rainforest, enjoying our respite from the heat. As we reached the river, we noticed some very old jaguar scat in the path. Sightings in this location are very rare (once or twice a year generally), but the scat was an exciting find which proved they were present!

We motored back to the lodge, enjoying the breeze (natural air-conditioning), then continued on a few hundred metres beyond our jetty to search an area close to the lodge for a harpy eagle which had been seen there the week before. A few minutes later we were home and sitting on the river bank watching a huge cluster of butterflies on the waterline. A few clients settled by a tree which was host to a number of parrot species, then after lunch and some well-deserved downtime, we all set off again at 4 pm.

Our plan for the afternoon was to enjoy a river cruise, coming back after dark in the hope of spotting some nocturnal species. We cruised at a slow pace, taking in razor-billed curassow, grey-necked wood-rail and more. What looked like a long, off-white wind sock hanging in a tree turned out to be a paper wasp nest and we also heard and saw yellow-rumped caciques, which had deliberately built their nests nearby for protection. A row of wonderfully camouflaged proboscis bats was clinging to the underside of a fallen branch overhanging the waterline, whilst bat falcons perched high above, ever ready.

We turned east, into the wide Teles Pires River and travelled along its southern bank, viewing great egret and kingfishers. We were in the Cristalino State Park, rather than the private reserve, so people were living along this stretch of the river and we could see fisherman and their homes on stilts along the banks. As the dusk deepened, we passed a small island, enjoying a lovely visual of two ladder-tailed nightjars in flight, before turning around to cruise into the glorious sunset.

Shafts of light passed through cumulus clouds and fell across the river. As the sky turned deep orange, it was reflected on the surface of the river, allowing us to get lost in our own thoughts at this special moment. Later, Venus appeared in the indigo night sky above and our spotlight came out.

Our return to the Cristalino River was marked by a spectacled caiman, which was swiftly followed by a Schneider's dwarf caiman and a number of boat-billed night herons. Eye-shine gave away a paca moving along the riverbank, which hid at our approach. It eventually emerged again and we noted its striking fur pattern as it moved further away from us.

Dinner was accompanied by jazzy versions of Christmas songs which caused a few wry smiles!

Day 11: Exploring the Amazon

Thursday 13 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 33°C

An early start ensured that half of the group was at the top of the lodge's canopy Tower I at dawn. Shortly before leaving at 4.45 am, we had made a quick trip down to the jetty, resulting in a capybara sighting. Tower I is a slightly narrower tower with steeper steps than Tower II, but it is still 50.4 metres high. On the way to the top, you pass two viewing platforms with magnificent views - well worth the effort of getting up there. Light dawned and the sky was peppered with clouds, which enhanced the beauty of the sun when it eventually rose over the horizon, welcoming in the new day.

As we watched the light change and the mist evaporate, the colours of the forest below became more and more prominent. We were much closer to the tree canopies than at Tower II and the next few hours were spent watching spider monkeys moving athletically through the trees and adding more birds to the ever-increasing species checklist. When the group re-appeared at the lodge for breakfast at 8.30 am, they agreed unanimously that it was a great way to start the day! A dawn trail with Bruno had been arranged as a substitute activity for those not wanting to climb the tower.

We were seen off from the lodge by the female offspring of the resident bare-faced curassow pair. Our walk had more of a botanic focus, so we learned about the local uses of plants as well as finding *Passiflora Cristalino*, an endemic plant. Of course, we didn't ignore any macrofauna along the way.

For those seeking even more immersion in the forest, a further walk was arranged with Cynthia after breakfast. Covering 2.4 kilometres, members of this group encountered white-nosed saki monkeys high in the canopy above and later, were stopped in their tracks by a cacophony of squealing, screeching and crashing through the undergrowth. They'd come across a sizeable group of white-lipped peccary, who appeared to be in a state of domestic conflict! They also discovered a leaf frog and some rather wonderful insects: a dragonfly with a hugely elongated body that assumed an extraordinary L shape when stationary, and a damselfly with two sets of wings (each punctuated with a yellow dot) that flew in a twin-engine helicopter style. Quite fascinating!

Lunch should have followed at 12.30 pm, but at 12.20 pm, Cynthia asked Helen to gather the group at the jetty immediately. Running for our cameras and then setting off just downriver, we learned that a harpy eagle had just been seen. Almost immediately, there it was, stationary on a branch, less than two metres above the water level, its enormous body in full view. We couldn't believe our luck! We manoeuvred slightly closer and sat quietly with it for perhaps 10 minutes, meanwhile, a juvenile great black hawk repeatedly called as it moved nearby. We were in full sun, so we decided to move to the other side of the river. We hoped it might

fly and we were right. The eagle took off, displaying its impressive wingspan with aplomb. We had our late lunch on an absolute high.

At 3.30 pm, we met at the jetty for something a little different. Cristalino Lodge offers a number of hides dotted around the reserve and we were going to split into two groups to visit a mammal and bird photography hide respectively. Departing along the river in different directions, the mammal group stopped to watch a caiman which was sunning itself along a flat rock on the middle of the river. Two large butterflies were drinking fluid from its eyes and had given its position away. It looked winged! The caiman changed position, providing us with a superb profile photo opportunity before sliding off into the water.

Soon afterwards, we came across two capybara swimming towards a nearby beach and saw a stunning rainbow. Walking in silence and single file, Cynthia spotted a collared trogon as we made our way towards a nearby salt lick. As we approached, we saw a group of white-lipped peccaries drinking there, so we hung back until these notoriously skittish creatures were aware of, but not alarmed by, our presence. We crept a little closer, then closer still, until they scattered. Then we ascended to the hide and stood in silence hoping they would return. When they did, we spent some time watching them grooming, scent marking and interacting with each other.

The trail back towards the river was very spongy in places, no doubt the result of many thousands of years of decomposition below our feet. We decided to stay out a little longer and amble up river to enjoy the late evening light. What a good decision that turned out to be, as this resulted in our first Neotropical otter sighting as well as tapir, paca and a nursery of young caiman whose eyes lit up like a string of lights along the shoreline!

We caught up with the rest of the group back at the lodge and learnt that they'd had a hugely enjoyable afternoon with Rafael, the head guide, observing and photographing a variety of new bird species from their hide. Just a short walk from the river, the ground-level hide consisted of a bench seat supporting four to five people, who all shoot images through a curtain of camouflaged material. Manakins, antbirds, antshrike and ant-tanagers all made an appearance.

Our final dinner at Cristalino Lodge proved to be a hit and we retired to our rooms early to pack and ready ourselves for our departure the next day. We would have a long travel day ahead.

Day 12: Alta Floresta to Campo Grande

Friday 14 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

Some of the group had enjoyed the canopy tower so much that they wanted to go up again in the morning. Coffee and cookies at 4.30 am fuelled us on our way and soon we came across a lone red brocket deer before commencing our climb. Arriving at the top in the dark, we watched the sun rise in very different conditions from those we had experienced 24 hours earlier. The day dawned with a brisk breeze and although the canopy below was shrouded in mist, it was being blown north at quite a rate, making for a wonderfully atmospheric scene. Birdsong began to penetrate the air and sightings soon followed - paradise and turquoise tanagers, black-faced dacnis and squirrel cuckoo amongst others. At one point, a large branch broke off and crashed to the ground below, making a huge racket as it passed through layers and layers of vegetation to reach the forest floor. Talk about impressive. Around 7.30 am, we descended to the platform below to be at eye level with the canopy, then made our way back to the lodge for breakfast.

Others in the group had gone for a 90-minute excursion upriver with Rafael. After viewing a fish-eating spider, they did a short, but sometimes steep, climb up from rainforest, through deciduous forest, to reach a granite outcrop, affording them great views over the surrounding area. For those not wanting to climb the canopy towers, this certainly proved to be a superb alternative, and they saw black-tailed trogon to boot!

At 10 am, we said our goodbyes to the staff and made our way downriver, retracing our steps back to Alta Floresta. The Amazon wasn't finished with us yet though, as a troop of spider monkeys moved around in the canopy of a dead tree high above us, not far from the lodge. Silhouetted against the blue sky, it was quite a sighting and we continued our journey with smiles on our faces. After being dropped off at the pick-up point for our road transfer back to the airport, we drove the dirt road, seeing Southern caracara, wood storks and a lone coati en route.

Our first flight of the day to Cuiabá was on time and our bags were checked through to Campo Grande, our final destination that evening. As such, we left the airport with just hand luggage and were transferred to Mãe Bonifácia Park to search for black-tailed marmosets. A little while later, and with our mission accomplished, we continued strolling through the park, birding as we went. We were then transferred to Aeroporto Grill for dinner. Not only could we choose from a huge selection of buffet food, but skewers of large slabs of beef and chicken were brought around and sliced according to our needs at the table. A great night was had by all before we were dropped back at the airport for our short hour-long flight to Campo Grande.

We landed at 11.40 pm and were transferred directly to our overnight accommodation at Hotel Deville by a lovely driver, Theo. Supremely comfortable, we fell into bed around 12.30 am, safe in the knowledge that we could have a lie in in the morning!

Day 13: Campo Grande to Bonito

Saturday 15 July 2023

Weather: cloudy with some sunshine, 23°C

After a leisurely breakfast, our time was our own until our departure at 10.00 am. Smiley Theo collected us on time and we commenced our journey to Bonito, 300 kilometres away. On the outskirts of town, Theo left us in the capable hands of Mr Wilson, our Portuguese-speaking driver, who proved to have quite an eye for wildlife! Initially, we drove past miles and miles of maize fields that eventually gave way to cattle farms. After stopping for a comfort break, we were almost at Bonito when Mr Wilson braked hard and reversed, as he'd spotted a giant anteater in a field to our right. We watched, in awe, as the bizarre-looking creature ambled away from us and just after we continued on our way, he braked again. This time we got out and watched as a tamandua walked along the side of the main road. Welcome to the Pantanal!

We arrived at Pousada Olho D'Água at 2.45 pm and had a hearty lunch. By 4 pm, we were walking past fields, hoping to view more giant ant-eaters. Although unsuccessful, the surrounding landscape was beautiful and a variety of birds and agouti, seen in the lodge gardens, kept us more than entertained. After dinner at 7.30 pm, an early night was had by all.

Day 14: Bonito to Caiman Lodge

Sunday 16 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

We were all excited about the day ahead. Not only were we heading to the final stop on our itinerary, Caiman Lodge, but first we would be visiting Buraco das Araras, a giant sinkhole, 600 metres deep, that is home to over 100 pairs of red-and-green macaws. Leaving at 7 am, and arriving just under an hour later, we had an accompanying interpreter, Gaby, who filled us in on the history of the hole en route. After being used as a dumping ground for many years, the surrounding land had been privately purchased in 1986. Work had immediately begun to remove tons and tons of rubbish from the sinkhole and reforest the area. In 1997, the owner introduced a few breeding pairs of macaws and they began to thrive. By 2007, the reserve was declared a protected area and it is now home to 169 avian species as well as other fauna.

We met our guide, Maria, and commenced a 900 metre trail, observing undulated tinamou, curassow and agouti as we walked. Our view from the double-decker viewing platform was spectacular. Macaws clung to

the steep walls and perched in the trees around us, often at eye level. A single blue-and-yellow macaw accompanied them, as well as black vulture and buff-necked ibis.

The macaws flew around us, sometimes above, sometimes below, and sometimes at eye level. The sheer intensity of their colouration was staggering. Time disappeared as we watched them fly with grace, fluidity and of course, a cacophony of squawking at all times! A solitary caiman lay by the water's edge far below in an algae-ridden lake. How it got there is anyone's guess, but rumour has it there used to be two until an anaconda took one. We noticed a laughing falcon perched silently (menacingly?) towards the opposite end of the sinkhole. There was another viewing platform close to it, so we walked towards it, watching it fly as we passed. Our visit was over too soon, but it had been hugely enjoyable. A blue-crowned motmot spotted on the way out was the icing on the cake!

By 10.15 am, we were back in Bonito and at midday we had reached Miranda, the closest town to the lodge. From there, the last 36 kilometres of our journey would be on gravel and we couldn't believe our luck when half an hour later, Mr Wilson braked slowly and our brains computed that the dark, hairy shape on the side of the road was, in fact, a giant ant-eater (it looked like a sloth bear)! We quickly, but quietly jumped out of the vehicle and cautiously followed it as it climbed through the fence and into a field, ambling away from us. Upon entering Caiman Reserve twenty minutes later, we came across two more. This was going to be good!

We took in our first views of Yacare caiman as we approached the lodge itself. After checking in (and hearing cheers, as some guests were watching the Wimbledon men's final nearby), we enjoyed a buffet lunch before being shown to our suites. We had a little time to settle in before meeting in a communal area at 3.15 pm for an introductory briefing with our guide, Murilo (also known as Muka).

A PowerPoint presentation gave us a comprehensive introduction to the climate, geography, flora and fauna of the Pantanal, whilst also providing a history of Caiman Lodge. We learnt that the land is mixed-use, with cattle ranching sitting alongside wildlife conservation, and that three NGOs are based onsite researching hyacinth macaws, blue-fronted parrots and jaguar. Onçafari work onsite with jaguars and tapirs and they estimate there to be 60-80 big cats in the vicinity.

Once ready to go, we met Eginó, our local guide, and climbed aboard our open 9-seater (three-tiered rows of three) Toyota Hylux. Caiman always provides a two-person team, a biologist and a field guide who is generally a Pantaneiro who has lived and worked there for a minimum of ten years. As soon as we set off, we came across a small group of capybara, including a newborn that utterly stole our hearts. The scenery we were passing through was unlike anything we'd experienced so far - dense thickets of palm trees were nestled in and around marshy pools, and water birds were out in force, including heron, egret, ibis, limpkin and storks. We drove along elevated roads watching caimans sunning themselves and admiring the flowering piúva trees, with their striking pink trumpet flowers (that bloom once a year after a cold front) providing regular flashes of colour. A yellow anaconda was seen briefly lying on some flattened grass before it disappeared under water. Pampas deer were walking on the firmer ground and white-lipped peccaries were foraging, their jaws clashing noisily when disturbed. There was so much wildlife that we almost didn't know where to look.

As the light faded and day gave way to night, we passed a roosting area for hundreds of egrets and ibis. Perched in the spindly vegetation, they were quite a sight to behold. Goggles were handed out to those that wanted additional protection from flying insects and we drove on towards an area where a jaguar kill had recently been discovered. Fireflies created flickers of light and we drove off-road searching for signs of big cat activity by spotlight.

Before we knew it, Murilo exclaimed that he had them. Them?! Our adrenaline peaked, even more so when we caught sight of a large female jaguar, breathing heavily right in front of us. A cub had walked into the thicket at our arrival but a flick of the flashlight revealed another one feasting on a carcass. Wow! We had three jaguars and we'd only been there a matter of hours. We had the sightings entirely to ourselves, so we sat there for half an hour (at least) before heading home.

Our journey back to the lodge provided us with sightings of a common potoo sitting on an old tree trunk, which was relying one hundred per cent on its incredible camouflage. Where the trunk stopped and the creature began, who knew?! A great potoo then flew ahead of us in the road and we saw our first Brazilian rabbit.

It was pizza night back at the lodge; their wood-fired oven was in constant use throughout the evening and we went to bed full of anticipation for what the next day might bring.

Day 15: On safari

Monday 17 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

Our focus for the day was giant anteater. Setting off at 7 am, we drove over a bridge which was more than a hundred years old, crossing the lagoon in front of the lodge and marvelling at the stillness of the water and how it beautifully reflected the clouds above. We reached the lodge's airstrip and slowly drove through fields full of cattle, looking out for their unlikely companions. Rheas were out in force, but the hairy mammals we were after were not. We did, however, see a lot of birds and enjoyed a wonderful hyacinth macaw sighting. We'd seen quite a few pairs of hyacinth macaws sitting on top of their boxes (put in place by the Hyacinth Macaw Project), but we also came across a pair in a tree and a single macaw (most likely their offspring), sitting on an opposite branch. The youngster did a fly-by, coming back to land in the same tree, its amazing plumage showed off to perfection in the soft morning light.

We then entered one of the conserved areas in the reserve and the scenery around us changed immediately to dense palms and patches of brackish wetland, contrasting well with the lime-green carpets of grass. Not far from the lodge, we stopped overlooking a patch of water hyacinths and observed a caiman which looked as though it had its eye on a fish which was being eaten by a night heron. As it inched closer, we were very much hoping for an altercation, but the heron finished its meal and moved off in search of more prey unharmed. As we continued, we came across a newborn (perhaps only days old), pampas deer suckling from its mother. Like a miniature Bambi. It was wonderful to watch it consider us but stay close to Mum for reassurance.

As we prepared to depart the scene, Murilo advised that a male jaguar was currently being viewed outside one of the other lodges on the reserve. As the jaguar was stationary, Murilo asked if we wanted to try our luck with him. There was no hesitation in our response. Traversing the next few kilometres with bated breath, we finally arrived and could see the jaguar crouching in a water tunnel beneath the road. He turned around to face us as we cautiously approached and then suddenly trotted towards a nearby thicket. He was clearly limping and had a visible open wound, but he was still absolutely magnificent, not to mention huge! Whether he had had a scrap with another male or had injured himself hunting, we will never know. Not wanting to cause undue stress, however, we left him to lick his wounds. The group was elated at another big cat sighting. Finally, a pair of whistling herons caught our attention, their beautiful facial colouration an absolute sight to behold and a fine finish to our first morning drive in the Southern Pantanal.

After lunch at 12.30 pm, a few of us attended a brief presentation on the work of the Hyacinth Macaw Project that was established here in 1990. Through deforestation, illegal trade and the use of their feathers as ornaments, their population was less than 2,000 individuals when work began, but now with a better understanding of their needs and subsequent conservation efforts in the field, this has increased to more than 5,000 individuals across the Pantanal. The species is now classified as vulnerable rather than threatened and for those that wish to find out more, it is possible to go on safari with the organisation to visit one of the 49 nest boxes dotted around the reserve.

Leaving the lodge again at 3.30 pm, a circle of birds on the ground right outside the gate caught our attention as they were making a racket. No wonder, a yellow anaconda was right in the middle of them and they were, we anthropomorphised, politely asking it to move on! We jumped down from the vehicle, giving the snake plenty of room, and got down at eye level to try and capture it coming towards us on camera. It was a

beautiful, deep green on the top and bright yellow underneath. It slowly made its way across the access road to the lodge, then under the entrance gate, and we carried on with our safari, leaving staff to monitor its movements from there on.

Our focus returned to the giant anteaters and we headed back to the airstrip, where Murilo immediately spotted one walking directly across the strip itself! We drove in to get a closer look and then disembarked to try and follow it on foot. Thirty minutes later we were still doing so. It had been quite an afternoon and we weren't even an hour into our drive!

Leaving 'our' obliging anteater for other vehicles to enjoy, we drove on and couldn't believe our eyes when we saw another one very close by...then another...and then another! It sounds absolutely ridiculous, but in the space of the next ten minutes, we came across a total of 10 individuals, including one mother with her youngster holding onto her back. We tried to approach her twice, but each time she began to run so we held back, let her relax and we carried on our way.

The sun dipped towards the horizon, so we made our way towards the bridge by the lodge to watch the sunset. Murilo then spotted a number of hyacinth macaws on the ground, their silhouettes reflected in a small puddle. As we approached, we noticed another 14 in a tree nearby. The light faded, so we left them and watched the magnificent sunset from the bridge.

We continued on a night drive, heading towards another lodge on the reserve where jaguar tracks had been picked up. After a brief stop for iced tea, tea and snacks, during which we saw crab-eating foxes trotting close by, we carried on, just in time to see a female jaguar and her cub cross the road ahead of us.

A little later, another jaguar was seen just off the side of the road. We killed the engine and waited to see if it would cross in front of us. Our patience was rewarded as it stuck its head out into the road, contemplated us and then walked ahead, seemingly unconcerned by our presence. The remainder of the drive produced sightings of Brazilian rabbit, tarantula and another common potoo. The frog chorus as we passed fields of water was memorable (and loud!) and we stopped to contemplate our insignificance below the Milky Way.

Dinner was an animated affair, discussing the various highlights of the day. It had been a belter!

Day 16: On safari

Tuesday 18 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 26°C

Another 7 am departure saw us driving into the sunrise for a bush walk along the Aracari Trail. Egino led the way with Murilo translating what he was saying about what we were seeing. Jaguarundi, deer and jaguar tracks were pointed out, along with a number of trees and their uses. We were shown how to get fresh water, fishing hooks, twine and cutlery from a bromeliad plant called 'Heart of Flame' and how tree termite mounds that have fallen to the ground can be crushed up and used as a garden fertiliser.

We found a two-metre-long snake skin by the side of the pathway, then discovered a lion ant and ocelot claw marks etched in tree bark. We also photographed orchids and learnt about cat's claw vine which is used as a traditional cure for colic. We even tasted water extracted from the unripe fruit of the Acuri palm trees, and its flesh which is gnawed upon by agouti. This fruit is also favoured by hyacinth macaws, who use their powerful bills to break open the kernel and feed on the nuts cradled inside. We enjoyed some birding too and by 9.30 am, we were just back on our vehicle when a jaguarundi was seen running across the road ahead of us across an open patch of land. Thankfully we were all on board, so we raced towards it, but it was too fast, disappearing into the lush marsh grasses. Nevertheless, we'd all seen it and we returned to the lodge happy after another superb morning.

We were due to commence our afternoon safari at 3.30 pm, but we were eager beavers, raring to go, so we set off early. Our mission was to find black-and-gold howler monkeys and hopefully tapir too. We set off

north to a hummock (a raised circle of land) that is known to be home to a small troop of our sought-after primates. As always, when you are focussed on being somewhere to take full advantage of the light, wildlife pops up everywhere to try and divert your attention. This safari was no exception!

Savanna hawks, snail kites, black-collared hawks and a variety of other birdlife posed beautifully, so we stopped to admire them. Jabiru, egret and woodstork flew overhead and nighthawks blended into sandbanks, but we eventually arrived at the hummock and walked in, scanning the canopy above us for signs of the howlers. It took some time, and a tree termite nest that looked suspiciously like a dark male curled up in a tree fork almost fooled us (and Egino!), but then we saw them.

A creamy-coloured female was cradling her baby. The baby proceeded to manoeuvre itself over her, absolutely delighting us as it peered over her for a closer look at us. Another female and baby joined them and we all stood, looking to the heavens, as a few more began to move through the trees. Some clients were distracted by a pale-crested woodpecker and a tropical screech owl. Then red-and-green macaws settled noisily above us, while two jabiru storks returned to their huge nest. There was a lot going on, but we stopped for sundowners and then started our night drive down a forest road, hoping to glimpse tapir. Murilo stopped at one point, convinced he'd seen eye shine at the right height, but after sitting quietly for a few minutes with no further signs of movement, we moved on.

We'd been advised to bring an extra layer with us as dinner would not be at the lodge that night. We had not been given any further information, so had put two and two together and had come up with five, assuming we'd be having a bush dinner. As such, it was a real surprise to approach the stable block and see it beautifully illuminated ahead of us. We disembarked, were given a shot of cachaca and then welcomed to a traditional Brazilian BBQ, complete with a guitar-playing Pantaneiro, who sang traditional songs for us throughout the evening.

Meat was sizzling over coals on huge bamboo-style poles and a vast selection of salads and roasted vegetables had also been prepared. The giant skewers of meat were brought to the tables and slices were carved off directly onto our plates. It was a veritable feast and we thoroughly enjoyed it! Opportunistic crab-eating foxes hung around, no doubt hoping for a few leftover scraps.

When we were ready, we were relayed back to the lodge just a few minutes away. What a wonderful evening.

Day 17: On safari

Wednesday 16 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 29°C

Jaguar day! An early start was in store as the group was spending the day with the Onçafari team. After coffee and cake, we departed at 5.30 am, splitting the group in two across two (6-seater) vehicles.

Going our separate ways, we were offered ponchos and hot water bottles and briefed that each vehicle had an antenna attached to the bonnet that would pick up a signal from any collared animals within a two kilometre radius. Forty-five minutes later, one vehicle was tracking a large male jaguar. Heading off-road, our driver expertly negotiated tracts of fairly dense bush before reaching an impenetrable palm thicket. The signal suggested that the jaguar was slap bang in the middle of it (of course), just a metre or two away. We strained to get a glimpse of him and slowly circumnavigated the thicket, peering in constantly until one eagle-eyed client finally differentiated his rosettes from a pile of leaves (it was surprisingly difficult) and we had a visual!

We re-positioned ourselves until we could see his bulk more clearly and it was obvious that he was resting. He lifted his head once or twice, but was generally oblivious to our presence. We, on the other hand, were absolutely in awe of him and of our proximity to him. It was a humbling experience as he was magnificent!

Meanwhile, after a brief visual of a tapir, the other group were following the signal for a female jaguar with a year-old cub. They found the female and were watching her sleeping in the shade of a hummock when her cub was seen approaching. It drank from a nearby pool of water, brazenly walked up to their vehicle,

considered them, and then went to join Mum. Wow! Both groups were in radio contact with each other and came together to watch the cub rest its head on Mum's back before both fell asleep. We returned to the lodge for breakfast fully appreciative of just how privileged we'd been to spend time with these wonderful creatures.

At 3 pm, we were collected by Onçafari again and drove the short distance to their headquarters, a minute or two away. We listened to a presentation about their work with jaguars and more recently, with tapir, as well as a brief overview of their other projects within Brazil. When the presentation ended, we were informed that one of their team was already out in the field and had recently come across a different female with a cub, not far from the lodge. We jumped aboard our two vehicles, keen to try our luck. We were off!

15 minutes later and we were with them! The cub was sitting quietly on the edge of a patch of forest overlooking a watery plain, while the female had walked ahead, presumably hunting. We caught up with her preening on an elevated piece of land (hoorah) and she was glorious in the afternoon light. Eventually, she got up and proceeded to walk parallel to the road. The lagoon next to us was full of caiman, which had taken to the water, but she ignored them and walked down into a patch of dense palms. Anticipating where she may re-appear, we positioned our vehicle along a track and waited.

What happened next was pure magic. Sure enough, she crept cautiously into the open, head down, watching us intently. She continued towards us as we waited with bated breath. When not a peep arose from us, she stood tall, contemplated us in full view and then walked right past us. We followed and then lost her for a minute. One vehicle went ahead and suddenly we realised that she had climbed a tree and was lying on a branch surveying an area of water below. Could today get any better? We watched her for a while as she moved further up the tree, positioning herself so that all four legs were dangling off the branch, and putting her head down to settle in for a snooze.

Half of the group elected to wait and see if she moved again, while the other half decided to have a closer look at her cub. The cub was in the same position and didn't look like she was going to move any time soon, so we pressed on, travelling further up the road as the male we'd seen in the morning had been spotted on the move further ahead. We tracked his signal and ended up in a field, where we watched him lying next to a kill, being well and truly harassed by flies. He was lying down but kept swinging his head, snapping at them and swatting them with his huge paws. We were losing light and the colours in the sky behind him condensed from yellow to pink to red and we thanked our lucky stars for being here with him.

After dark, we gathered with all the other lodge guests for a spot of stargazing, followed by dinner in a magical setting under lanterns hanging from trees. Fire pits were lit, hammocks and comfy chairs were set out around them and the food was delicious. Fish, chicken, halloumi and meat kebabs jostled for attention next to bread, dips, salads and vegetables. We had a slow drive home, spotlighting along the way, to end a remarkable day.

Day 18: Campo Grande to London

Thursday 20 July 2023

Weather: sunny, 33°C

Our last morning in the Pantanal dawned clear and we revelled in the ibis and macaw dawn chorus. We'd opted for a 6 am departure, in order to drive the forest roads on a quest for tapir. Despite coming across fresh tracks and checking a number of wetland areas, they once again proved elusive. We were happy though, absorbing the ever-changing landscapes. As we committed it to memory, we came across marsh deer, capybara, a myriad of raptors, agouti and potentially, but not confirmed, a tayra.

We were back for breakfast by 8 am, ensuring we had enough time to prepare for our journey home. It proved fairly difficult to leave and after some heartfelt words from us and from our guiding team, we clambered aboard Mr Wilson's vehicle at 12.30 pm, ready to return to Campo Grande.

The first hour, over a gravel road, produced sightings of another giant anteater and a six-banded armadillo. By 4.30 pm, we were all checked in and we flew to São Paulo to connect to our international flight to Heathrow, departing shortly before midnight.

Day 19: Arrive UK

Friday 21 July 2023

We had plenty of time to contemplate our experiences whilst flying home across the Atlantic. There is an expression in Brazil that to be lucky is to have hot feet. We had certainly hot-footed it across the country and it had been completely and utterly marvellous!



Checklist for Best of Brazil



On the species checklist below, mammals have been ticked every day that they were seen. Birds, on the other hand, have only been ticked the first time we saw them. We may have seen them repeatedly thereafter.

	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
	MAMMALS																		
1	Black-tufted marmoset	<i>Callithrix penicillata</i>		✓	✓	✓													
2	Brazilian guineapig	<i>Cavia aperea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓											
3	Pampas deer	<i>Ozotoceros bezoarticus</i>		✓	✓										✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Maned wolf	<i>Chrysocron brachyurus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓											
5	White-lipped peccary	<i>Tayassu pecari</i>		✓		✓	✓					✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
6	Collared peccary	<i>Tayassu tajacu</i>		✓		✓	✓												
7	South American tapir	<i>Tapirus terrestris</i>				✓						✓						✓	
8	Six-banded armadillo	<i>Euphractus sexcinctus</i>				✓													✓
9	Grey (brown) brocket deer	<i>Mazama gouazoubira</i>				✓										✓			✓
10	Crab eating fox	<i>Cerdocyon thousand</i>				✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Nine-banded armadillo	<i>Dasyus movemcinctus</i>					✓												
12	Brown capuchin monkey	<i>Cebus apella</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
13	Paca	<i>Agouti paca</i>							✓		✓	✓							
14	Black spider monkey	<i>Ateles paniscus</i>								✓			✓						
15	White-nosed Saki monkey	<i>Chiropotes albinasus</i>								✓		✓							
16	Proboscis bat	<i>Rhynchonycteris naso</i>									✓								
17	Capybara	<i>Hydrochaeris hydrochaeris</i>										✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

18	Neotropical otter	<i>Lontra longicaudis</i>											✓							
19	Red brocket deer	<i>Mazama americana</i>												✓			✓	✓	✓	
20	South American coati	<i>Nasua nasua</i>												✓						
21	Black-tailed marmoset	<i>Micro melanurus</i>												✓						
22	Azara's agouti	<i>Dasyprocta azarae</i>												✓	✓		✓		✓	
23	Giant ant-eater	<i>Myrmecophaga tridactyla</i>													✓	✓	✓		✓	
24	Southern tamandua	<i>Tamandua tetradactyla</i>													✓					
25	Jaguar	<i>Panthera onca</i>														✓	✓		✓	
26	Brazilian rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus brasiliensis</i>														✓	✓	✓		
27	Jaguarundi	<i>Herpailurus yagouaroundi</i>																✓		
28	Marsh deer	<i>Blastocerus dichotomus</i>																✓	✓	✓
29	Black-and-gold howler monkey	<i>Alouatta caracal</i>																✓		
	BIRDS																			
1	Lesser kiskadee	<i>Philohydor lictor</i>	✓																	
2	Toco toucan	<i>Ramphastos toco</i>	✓																	
3	Southern caracara	<i>Caracara plan us</i>	✓																	
4	Saffron finch	<i>Sicalis flaveola</i>	✓																	
5	Greater kiskadee	<i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	✓																	
6	Rufous hornero	<i>Furnarius rufus</i>	✓																	
7	Buff-necked ibis	<i>Theristicus caudatus</i>	✓																	
8	Southern lapwing	<i>Vanellus chilensis</i>	✓																	
9	Picazuro pigeon	<i>Patagioenas picazuro</i>	✓																	
10	Black vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	✓																	
11	Rufous-browed pepper-shrike	<i>Cyclarhis gujanensis</i>	✓																	
12	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓																

13	Greater rhea	<i>Rhea americana</i>		✓															
14	Tropical kingbird	<i>Tyrannus melancholius</i>		✓															
15	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓															
16	Red-legged seriema	<i>Cariama cristata</i>		✓															
17	Chopi blackbird	<i>Gnorimopsar Chopi</i>		✓															
18	Swallow-tailed hummingbird	<i>Eupetomena macroura</i>		✓															
19	Curl-crested jay	<i>Cyanocorax cristatellus</i>		✓															
20	Guira cuckoo	<i>Guira guira</i>		✓															
21	Sayaca tanager	<i>Thraupis sayaca</i>		✓															
22	Scaled dove	<i>Columbina squammata</i>		✓															
23	(Lowland) hepatic tanager	<i>Piranga flags</i>		✓															
24	Small-billed tinamou	<i>Crypturelles parvirostris</i>		✓															
25	Rufous collared sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>		✓															
26	Peach-fronted parakeet	<i>Aratinga aurea</i>		✓															
27	Chalk-browed mockingbird	<i>Mimus saturninus</i>		✓															
28	Rufous hornero	<i>Furnarius rufus</i>		✓															
29	Blue and yellow macaw	<i>Ara ararauna</i>		✓															
30	Aplomado falcon	<i>Falco femoral is</i>		✓															
31	Burrowing owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>		✓															
32	Red and green macaw	<i>Ara chloropterus</i>			✓														
33	Blue-fronted parrot/turquoise-fronted Amazon	<i>Amazonia aestivation</i>			✓														
34	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓														
35	White woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes candidus</i>			✓														
36	Pale-vented pigeon	<i>Patagioenas cayennensis</i>			✓														
37	Pale-breasted thrush	<i>Turdus leucomelas</i>			✓														



38	Golden-crowned warbler (pula pula)	<i>Basileuterus culicivorus</i>			✓														
39	Red-bellied macaw	<i>Orthopsittaca manilata</i>			✓														
40	Yellow-faced parrot	<i>Alipiopsitta xanthops</i>			✓														
41	Muscovy duck	<i>Cairina moschata</i>			✓														
42	Masked gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila dumicola</i>			✓														
43	Suiriri flycatcher/Campo Suiriri	<i>Suiriri suiriri</i>			✓														
44	Narrow-billed woodcreeper	<i>Lepidocolaptes angustirostris</i>			✓														
45	Southern beardless-tyrannulet	<i>Camptostoma obsoletum</i>			✓														
46	Blue-crowned parakeet	<i>Aratinga acuticaudata</i>			✓														
47	Chapada flycatcher/suiriri	<i>Suiriri islerorum</i>			✓														
48	White-banded tanager/Shrike-like tanager	<i>Neothraupis fasciata</i>			✓														
49	Forktailed palm-swift/Neotropical palm swift	<i>Tachornis squamata</i>			✓														
50	Plain-crested elaenia	<i>Elaenia cristata</i>			✓														
51	Grassland sparrow	<i>Ammodramus humeralis</i>			✓														
52	Sharp-tailed (grass) tyrant	<i>Culicivora caudacuta</i>			✓														
53	Plumbeous seedeater	<i>Sporophila plumer</i>			✓														
54	Rufous-sided pygmy tyrant	<i>Euscarthmus rufomarginatus</i>			✓														
55	Lesser yellow-headed vulture	<i>Cathartes burrovianus</i>			✓														
56	Rufous-fronted thornbird	<i>Phacellodomus rufifrons</i>			✓														
57	King vulture	<i>Sarcoramphus papa</i>			✓														



58	Glittering-bellied emerald	<i>Chlorostilbon lucidus</i>			✓														
59	Crimson-crested woodpecker	<i>Campephilus melanoleucus</i>			✓														
60	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>			✓														
61	Black-throated saltator	<i>Saltator atricollis</i>			✓														
62	Chotoy spinetail	<i>Schoeniophylax phryganophilus</i>			✓														
63	Wedge-tail grass finch	<i>Emberizoides herbicola</i>			✓														
64	Rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓														
65	Horned sun gem	<i>Heliactin bilopha</i>			✓														
66	Campo flicker	<i>Colaptes campestris</i>			✓														
67	Cinnamon tanager	<i>Schistochlamys ruficapillus</i>			✓														
68	Rufous-winged antshrike	<i>Thamnophilus torquatus</i>			✓														
69	Scissor-tailed nightjar	<i>Hydropsalis torquata</i>			✓														
70	Least nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles pusillus</i>			✓														
71	Common pauraque	<i>Nyctidromus albicollis</i>			✓														
72	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓														
73	Tropical screech-owl	<i>Megascops choliba</i>			✓														
74	Eared dove	<i>Zenaida auriculata</i>				✓													
75	Laughing falcon	<i>Herpetotheres cachinnans</i>				✓													
76	Grey monjita	<i>Xolmis cinereus</i>				✓													
77	Coal-crested finch	<i>Charitospiza eucosma</i>				✓													
78	White-rumped tanager	<i>Cypsnagra hirndinacea</i>				✓													
79	White-tailed hawk	<i>Buteo al I caudatus</i>				✓													
80	Blue and white swallow	<i>Pygochelidon cyanoleuca</i>				✓													
81	Southern rough-winged swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx ruficollis</i>				✓													



82	White-rumped monjita	<i>Xolmis velatus</i>				✓													
83	Picui ground dove	<i>Columbina picui</i>				✓													
84	Southern scrub flycatcher	<i>Sublegatus modestus</i>				✓													
85	Yellow-headed caracara	<i>Milvago chimachima</i>				✓													
86	Collared crescent-chest	<i>Melanopareia torquata</i>				✓													
87	Rusty-margined guan	<i>Penelope superciliaris</i>					✓												
88	Spot-backed puffbird	<i>Nystalus maculatus</i>					✓												
89	Guira tanager	<i>Hemithraupis guira</i>					✓												
90	Great horned owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>					✓												
91	Short-crested flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus ferox</i>					✓												
92	Rufous-browed peppershrike	<i>Cyclarhis gujanensis</i>					✓												
93	Rufous-tailed jacamar	<i>Galbula ruficauda</i>					✓												
94	Silver-beaked tanager	<i>Ramphocelus carbo</i>					✓												
95	White-vented violet-ear	<i>Colibri serrirostris</i>					✓												
96	Palm tanager	<i>Thraupis palmarum</i>					✓												
97	Rusty-backed antwren	<i>Formicivora rufa</i>					✓												
98	Long-tailed tyrant	<i>Colonia colonus</i>					✓												
99	Drab water-tyrant	<i>Ochthornis littoralis</i>								✓									
100	White-winged swallow	<i>Tachycineta albiventer</i>								✓									
101	Yellow-billed tern	<i>Sternula superciliaris</i>								✓									
102	Ruddy pigeon	<i>Patagioenas subvinacea</i>								✓									
103	Southern rough-winged swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx ruficollis</i>								✓									
104	White-banded swallow	<i>Atticora fasciata</i>								✓									
105	Green ibis	<i>Mesembrinibis cayennensis</i>								✓									
106	Amazon kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle amazona</i>								✓									



107	Black-fronted nunbird	<i>Monasa nigrifrons</i>							✓										
108	Swallow-winged puffbird	<i>Chelidoptera tenebrosa</i>							✓										
109	Refuscent tiger heron	<i>Tigrisoma lineatum</i>							✓										
110	Neotropical cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>							✓										
111	Ringed kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle torquata</i>							✓										
112	Red-capped cardinal	<i>Poroaria gularis</i>							✓										
113	Rusty-margined flycatcher	<i>Myiozetetes cayanensis</i>							✓										
114	Blue-grey tanager	<i>Thraupis episcopus</i>							✓										
115	Boat-billed heron	<i>Cochlearius cochlearius</i>							✓										
116	Scarlet macaw	<i>Ara macao</i>								✓									
117	Greater yellow-headed vulture	<i>Cathartes melambrotus</i>								✓									
118	Yellow-rumped cacique	<i>Cacicus cela</i>								✓									
119	Capped heron	<i>Pilherodius pileatus</i>								✓									
120	Sunbittern	<i>Eurypyga helias</i>								✓									
121	Grey-fronted dove	<i>Leptotila rufaxilla</i>								✓									
122	Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>								✓									
123	Grey-breasted sabrewing	<i>Campylopterus largipennis</i>								✓									
124	Swallow tanager	<i>Tersina viridis</i>								✓									
125	Green/olive oropendola	<i>Psarocolius viridis</i>								✓									
126	Crimson-bellied parakeet	<i>Pyrrhura perlata</i>								✓									
127	Masked tityra	<i>Tityra semifasciata</i>								✓									
128	Spangled cotinga	<i>Cotinga cayana</i>								✓									
129	Channel-billed tucan	<i>Ramphastos vitellinus</i>								✓									
130	Blue-headed parrot	<i>Pionus menstus</i>								✓									
131	Bare-necked fruit-crow	<i>Gymnoderus foetidus</i>								✓									



132	Red-throated caracara	<i>Ibycter americanus</i>									✓								
133	Golden-winged parakeet	<i>Brotogeris chrysoptera</i>									✓								
134	Dark-winged trumpeter	<i>Psophia viridis</i>									✓								
135	Curl-crested aracari	<i>Pteroglossus beauharnaesii</i>										✓							
136	(Amazonia) Violaceous trogon	<i>Trogon violaceus</i>										✓							
137	Paradise jacamar	<i>Galbula dea</i>										✓							
138	Green-and-rufous kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle inda</i>										✓							
139	Green kingfisher	<i>Chloroceryle americana</i>										✓							
140	Red-necked woodpecker	<i>Campephilus rubricollis</i>										✓							
141	Chestnut-fronted macaws	<i>Ara Severus</i>										✓							
142	Plumbeous kite	<i>Ictinia plumbea</i>										✓							
143	Black-throated mango	<i>Anthracothorax nigricollis</i>										✓							
144	Variegated flycatcher	<i>Empidonomus varius</i>										✓							
145	Hook-billed kite	<i>Chondrohierax uncinatus</i>										✓							
146	Blue-winged parakeet	<i>Forpus xanthopterygius</i>										✓							
147	Long-billed starthroat	<i>Heliomaster longirostris</i>										✓							
148	Dusky-headed parakeet	<i>Aratinga weddellii</i>										✓							
149	Madeira parakeet	<i>Pyrrhura snethlageae</i>										✓							
150	Razor-billed curassow	<i>Mitu tuberosum</i>										✓							
151	Bat falcon	<i>Falco ruficularis</i>										✓							
152	Red-throated piping-guan	<i>Aburria kujubi</i>										✓							
153	Grey-necked wood-rail	<i>Aramedis cajanea</i>										✓							
154	Ladder-tailed nightjar	<i>Hydropsalis climacocerca</i>										✓							
155	White-fronted nunbird	<i>Monasa morphoeus</i>												✓					

227	Snail kite	<i>Rostrhamus sociability</i>																✓		
228	Roseate spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>																✓		
229	Pied lapwing	<i>Vanellus cayanus</i>																✓		
230	Black-necked stilt	<i>Himantopus Mexican us</i>																✓		
231	Pale-crested woodpecker	<i>Celeus lugubris</i>																✓		
232	Purplish jay	<i>Cyanocorax cyanomelas</i>																	✓	
233	Thrush-like wren	<i>Campylorhynchus turdinus</i>																		✓
234	Blue-throated piping guan	<i>Pipile cumanensis</i>																		✓
	REPTILES																			
1	Ameiva lizard	<i>Ameiva ameiva</i>		✓																
2	Tropidurus lizard	<i>Tropidurus torquatus</i>		✓																
3	Red-footed tortoise	<i>Chelonoides carbonaria</i>				✓														
4	Yellow-footed tortoise	<i>Chelonoidis denticulata</i>				✓														
5	Cuvier's dwarf caiman	<i>Paleosuchus palpebrosus</i>				✓	✓													
6	Rattlesnake	<i>Crotallus durissus</i>					✓													
7	False coral snake	<i>Oxyrhopus trigemius</i>					✓													
8	Spectacled caiman	<i>Caiman crocodiles</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓								
9	Schneider's dwarf caiman	<i>Paleosuchus trigonatus</i>							✓			✓								
10	Yacare caiman													✓	✓	✓	✓			
11	Yellow anaconda													✓	✓					
12	Tegu																✓	✓		
	AMPHIBIANS																			

1	Labyrinth pepper frog	<i>Leptodactylus labyrinthicus</i>		✓															
2	Geoffrey's moustachioed terrapin							✓			✓								
	BUTTERFLIES																		
1	Orange-barred sulphur	<i>Phoebis philea</i>				✓													
2	Eighty	<i>Not known</i>						✓											
3	Eighty eight	<i>Diaethria clymena</i>							✓										
4	Knifetail	<i>Not known</i>							✓										
5	Blue morpho	<i>Morpho peleides</i>							✓										
6	Owl	<i>Caligo martia</i>								✓									
7	White peacock	<i>Anartia jatrophae</i>															✓		

